RUTHLESS DESIRES BOOK 6

vicious DECEPTION

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Vicious Deception

Ruthless Desires 6

OceanofPDF.com

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Deleted Scene

Author's Note

Also By Elira Firethorn Ebook

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To everyone who's stuck with this series as it evolved and grew.
You quite literally changed my life.

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Playlist & Storyboard

Playlist:

Paralyzed – Teflon Sega

Hopeless – Picturesque

Snake – Kaphy, NEVR KNØW, BLVKES

Falling Apart – Hahlweg

Stick Around – ENVYYOU

Till Death Do Us Part – Rosenfeld

Killer In The Mirror – Set It Off

If It’s Vengeance You Want – Unlike Pluto

Chokehold – Sleep Token

Listen on Spotify.

Storyboard:

View on Pinterest.

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Before You Read

Vicious Deception is a dark, erotic romance book intended for people over the age of eighteen. Please read over this content list to make sure there's nothing inside this book that could affect you negatively. Put your mental health first please!

Emotional: panic attack, dissociation, reliving childhood trauma (emotional abuse and neglect, death of a young sibling, parental abandonment) and dealing with the aftereffects, fear of water, running anxious thoughts, skipping meals (due to anxiety/lack of appetite), self harm, PTSD, and infidelity (not between the MCs).

Physical: insomnia, torture, murder, kidnapping, self harm, domestic violence (not between MCs), and a threat to a child's safety.

Sexual: degradation, bondage, spitting, domination and submission, collaring, edging, orgasm control, knife play (with cutting), and blood play.

As is the case with all the books in this series, you won't find many physical descriptions of the main characters (and most of the side characters) so you can imagine them however you'd like.

The scenes in this book aren’t meant to be a guide to kink or BDSM. This is a work of fiction and should be read as such.

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Chapter One

Elliot

Note: This book contains darker themes. Please flip back and read the Before You Read section if you haven't already.

The taste of failure is bitter on my tongue as I pace around my room. My *cage.*

It's been over twelve hours since Holloway's men locked us up. Night has come and gone, but I haven't slept.

How can I?

In every possible way, we've failed. *I've* failed.

Not only were we unsuccessful at exacting revenge on Ludo, but we lost each other, too. Now we're trapped. Trapped, stuck, and helpless, caught up in the web that Holloway so cleverly weaved together. We don't even have a clue of how long we'll be alive for.

My only solace is that it doesn't seem like Holloway was able to capture Wren. As far as I can tell, his team didn't even make it back after they left

last night. I'm hoping Wren and Finn got away unscathed and that they're already deep in hiding.

As for me and the guys . . .

How can I get us out of here?

My mind wanders to Oliver. His soft sobs drifted through the walls last night, and each one was like a stab to the heart. I'm worried about Rhett, but I'm worried about Oliver more. He doesn't have access to his meds, and considering our situation, this will be so much worse than when he stopped taking them last time.

Lightly, I knock on the wall that separates me from Oliver. We can't talk—Ludo and his men have made that very clear—but we seem to be able to manage this.

After a few seconds, Oliver knocks back.

Is this what we've been reduced to? I can't even tell him I love him?

Overnight, the disbelief I felt has morphed into a burning rage. At Holloway, yes, but more so at myself. I'm the one who let this happen. I got so caught up in fooling Ludo that I didn't realize he fooled me.

It was a naive mistake, and it's cost us everything.

I hear footsteps in the hallway. A couple seconds later, my door opens, and Ludo steps in. Axel is right behind him with his dark hair pulled up into its usual bun.

Ludo's gaze travels over my body, leaving icy dread in its wake. "Well, you look like shit."

I don't respond. Don't even blink.

With a heavy sigh, Ludo steps forward. His hands are in his pockets, and he's watching me lazily.

I'm not a threat to him. Not anymore.

“I just want to know,” he says after a minute. “Was it worth it?”

“You know the answer to that.”

Ludo’s lips curve upward in a smug smirk. “I want to hear you say it.”

I press my lips together. He’ll have to force the words out of me.

But Ludo just sighs. His annoyance is there, hidden beneath a layer of indifference that I know is completely fake. If there’s one thing I know about Redback, it’s that he’s a prideful bastard. Our betrayal cut him deep.

“Why don’t you cut the act and tell me where my hard drive is,” Ludo bites out.

“Aubrey didn’t tell us who she sold it to.”

I don’t elaborate. Can’t. We have to stick with the story I told yesterday—that we helped Aubrey steal the hard drive and get off the property. Nothing more. It’s not even that far off from the truth.

She may not have sold the hard drive, but we really don’t know where she is. Obviously, Ludo isn’t buying it, but I’m not sure how else to sell the story, either. If I give more details, it’ll be obvious I’m lying because Rhett and Ol won’t be able to give the same information.

“Awfully convenient, don’t you think?” Axel says. His arms are crossed over his broad chest, and he’s staring down at me like I’m nothing more than gum on his shoe.

“You forget that I know you, Hayes,” Ludo says. “You like to be in control—to be the planner. There’s no way you don’t know all the details.”

I shrug. “Or maybe I trust Aubrey. I was right to do so—she followed through on her end of the deal.” A truth.

Ludo’s scowl sends satisfaction rippling through me, but it’s short-lived. He has an offer ready before I’ve even taken a breath. “Tell me where the drive is, and I’ll let Benny go.”

Tempting—if I actually thought he'd follow through. For a brief second, I'm glad Rhett isn't here. If Ludo presented him with that proposition, he'd have a much harder time turning him down.

"I don't know where it is," I say. "Nor do you have my trust."

"Did I ever?"

"Does that matter now?"

Again, Ludo sighs. He shifts his feet, his irritation getting harder to hide with every passing second. He has us cornered, but he's as well and truly fucked as we are. All his secrets are on that drive.

I didn't have time to look through all of it, but I saw enough. Ludo has woven an intricate web of lies, deals, and secret alliances. He's gone behind the backs of his so-called partners to make sure he always comes out on top.

It's all cleverly done, I'll give him that. But now that the threat of exposure is constantly looming over his head, he's as desperate as I am. There's no way I can tell Holloway where the drive is, so my best option is to continue feigning ignorance. Hopefully he'll fall for it at some point.

"I'm not lying to you," I say, enunciating every word. "Aubrey didn't want us to have any information. That way, you wouldn't be able to learn anything if something like this happened. I thought it was a smart idea."

Axel narrows his eyes as he scrutinizes my expression. Just as he opens his mouth to speak, Ludo cuts him off.

"I've sent men to search your house. They'll find it."

"What about the men you sent last night?" I can't hold back the slight taunt in my tone.

When Ludo doesn't respond immediately, relief billows through me. I already had my suspicions when I saw a team leave last night and not return, but this confirms it.

Wren is safe. We told her to contact Finn if something went wrong, and he won't let anything happen to her. Not again.

It also means that, most likely, the hard drive isn't even where I left it. We need it, and Finn knows the code to the safe. He probably grabbed it before he and Wren ran. *I hope.*

"What happened to my men is none of your business," Ludo snaps. "I *will* find Wren, and when I do, you'll regret ever getting involved with her."

"And in the meantime?" I ask.

"In the meantime," he bites out, "you'll do exactly what I tell you to or suffer the consequences."

There it is. I haven't forgotten that Holloway's original plan was to use Benny as leverage. We haven't known what for, but I have a feeling that's about to change.

"And what exactly are you going to have me do?"

He smiles. "What you're best at."

It's what I expected, but still, it doesn't add up. Until the wedding, he trusted us, so why use Benny as leverage?

Unless . . .

My chest tightens. "Who?"

"You'll learn that when the time comes."

I'm in no position to demand answers, so I turn away. Irrational ideas fill my head—ones of taking both of them on at once and killing Ludo here and now. It'd never work—they both have weapons, and my lack of sleep only puts me at more of a disadvantage.

Ludo moves toward the door, but then he stops. When he turns around to face me again, he's schooled his expression. The previous frustration and anger are long gone. "Why?" he asks. "Why'd you do it?"

I shrug. “Same reason we took jobs from you. The money was good.”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re really going to stick with that?”

“We have no reason to lie.”

“But you have no reason to tell the truth, either,” Ludo replies, his voice much louder than it needs to be. “Well, *you* don’t. I need you and Rhett in good condition. Oliver, on the other hand…”

The air rushes from my lungs. “What are you going to do to him?”

Ludo chuckles, and his smile sends a chill down my spine. He doesn’t say anything, instead opening the door and stepping out.

Panicked thoughts race through my head. I’m moving before I can stop myself, but Axel steps in front of me, blocking my path. His jaw is set, his expression hard, but there’s no pleasure in his eyes the way there is in Ludo’s. When he places a hand on my shoulder, his grip is firm but not forceful.

“You know better than this,” he says lowly.

“Get some sleep, Hayes,” Ludo tells me boredly. “You’ll need to be fully rested for your first job. Trust me, you won’t like what’ll happen if you fuck it up.”

Releasing me, Axel spins on his heel and exits the room. The door slams shut behind him and Ludo, leaving me with my hands balled into tight fists. I don’t move—don’t make a sound—as I listen for them to open Oliver’s door. Instead, their footsteps recede down the hallway.

Are they not going to ask him the same questions they asked me? Ludo said he would. It would be stupid not to.

Although…

Ludo knows about Oliver’s anxiety. For the last portion of our conversation, Ludo raised his voice much more than he needed to. I thought

he was trying to intimidate me, but maybe it was so his voice would carry into Oliver's room.

When he said he didn't need to keep Oliver in good condition, my thoughts immediately went to the physical. But Ludo has the power to do twice as much damage if he lets Oliver sit in fear and dread first.

Holloway is fucking with his mind.

Goddammit. Going off his meds so abruptly is bad enough. Why this, too?

I have to get him out of here.

Ludo said I'll be going on a job. It's not freedom, but it's as close as I can get. If I can find a way to contact Finn, I could…

Could what? You can't do anything until Benny is safe.

For a split second—one that immediately fills me with shame—I wonder if Rhett would forgive me if I let his brothers die. It would be so much simpler if I only had to focus on me, Ol, and Rhett. But I can't. Even if I was sure Rhett would forgive me, I can't leave two kids at the mercy of the cruelest man I've ever met. I refuse to stoop to Holloway's level of selfishness.

No. It has to be all of us, and it's on me to figure out a way to get us out of this before it's too late.

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Chapter Two

Oliver

Emptiness.

Complete, utter emptiness.

It’s the only thing I feel all day. I sit on the mattress, pace my room, and stare out the window into Holloway’s backyard, but I do it all numbly.

Every once in a while, I hear Elliot moving about his room. He knocks on the wall occasionally, just once each time, and I return it quietly. So far, either the men stationed outside our doors haven’t noticed, or they don’t care.

For most of the day, I keep trying to shake myself out of this god-awful dream. This can’t be right—this can’t be reality. It just doesn’t make sense.

How did we not see this coming? It was our responsibility to think of the worst-case scenarios. To be on the lookout for traps. But we were too sure of ourselves. It wasn’t naivety—we’re far past that.

This was foolishness. Stupidity.

By the time Ludo and Elliot’s conversation drifts into my bedroom, I feel like a ghost of myself. Physically I’m here, but I feel like I’m watching

myself from outside my body. Like I'm watching this all happen to someone else.

I'm so lost that I almost—*almost*—miss what Ludo tells Elliot.

I need you and Rhett in good condition. Oliver, on the other hand . . .

Soon after that, I hear Ludo exit Elliot's room and walk down the hallway. My chest tightens with every passing second. Why am I the odd one out? What does Holloway have planned for Ell and Rhett? And what does he have planned for *me?*

In a way, I already know the answer. Ludo doesn't let traitors get away with anything. Eventually, unless we find some way out of here, we'll end up dead. In the meantime, Holloway will do what he does best—cause pain.

And it sounds like I'll be getting the brunt of it.

My tears start up again. They sting my eyes, and even as I try to stop them, more come. *This is all my fault.* Wren never would've gotten caught if it hadn't been for me.

I don't blame her. I could *never.* Wren did her absolute best to get the hard drive. Ultimately, it's our fault for putting her in a position she wasn't ready for yet. If it had been one of us, maybe we would've been aware enough to catch that Andrew was watching. But no, instead we gave the most dangerous part of the job to the least experienced out of all of us.

None of this ever would've happened if I'd just *listened.* From the very beginning, I'm the one who always pushed for Wren's involvement. That first weekend, Elliot was ready to let her go, and Rhett would've gone along with it. But I refused to go back to the way things were.

From there, everything snowballed.

I'm the one who got Wren tangled up in the Williams job.

I'm the one who helped get Ell and Rhett on board with Wren helping us spy on Ludo in Florida.

I'm the one who insisted we could get Wren ready enough to pull off the heist at the wedding.

Elliot and Rhett were always hesitant. They wanted to keep Wren as safe as possible, even if it meant keeping her at arms' length or leaving her on the sidelines. Of course I've always cared about her safety, but she wanted to be a part of our revenge plans. She wanted to be a part of *us*, and I knew she was smart enough and strong enough to hold her own.

Even now, I still don't think I'm wrong. We just pushed her too far too fast. We got too desperate—maybe too overconfident.

I just hope she's safe.

If something happens to Wren, I'll never forgive myself. She knew the risks of getting involved with us, but it's not the same. We've been preparing for this for ten years. She's only had a couple months.

What if I never get to see her again?

I know I'll see Rhett and Ell again, even if it's only to die together. But Wren . . . I'd give anything to hold her in my arms one last time—to watch her eyes light up as I tell her I love her.

When night falls, my heart is heavy as I turn off the light and sink onto the bare mattress. I'm not tired enough to sleep, but I don't want to be awake. I'm drowning in the hopelessness of it all.

There's really no escape.

I curl up and squeeze my eyes shut. Maybe if I think hard enough, I can trick my body into feeling the warmth of someone curving their body around mine. A hand on my hip, soft breath on my neck, soothing words floating through the air and lulling me to sleep.

But all I hear is a light tap against my window. Probably a branch moved by the breeze. It happens again, this time a little louder.

And then I remember that there aren't any trees directly in front of my window.

Springing into an upright position, I peer through the darkness of my bedroom. I swear I see something move outside the window. *What is that? A bird?*

Quietly, I get to my feet and cross the room. As I get closer, there's another tap, and I'm just able to make out the unmistakable outline of a hand.

Ell.

Panic squeezes around my heart as I slide the window open. It makes some noise, but not enough to alert the guards outside. Even if they notice, I'm allowed to open the damn window to get some fresh air.

As I peer out, I realize Elliot is standing on a thin ledge. He must've shuffled across it from his window to mine.

Since our capture, Holloway has upped his security. Any of the men patrolling the yard could've seen Elliot if they'd only looked up. The darkness covers him, but not completely.

I'm just able to see Elliot lift a finger to his lips, a reminder to stay silent. He must know I'm about to tell him to go back to his room before he gets himself killed.

Carefully, Elliot climbs through the window. I help him to try and reduce the amount of noise it makes. This late at night, every movement feels as loud as a gunshot.

In reality, Elliot barely makes a sound as his feet hit the floor. He crushes me to his chest immediately, and I throw my arms around his neck. This is

far too dangerous to be practical, but I need him, even if it's only for a few moments.

Elliot's normal scent of sandalwood and oranges has faded, but I don't let myself fixate on why. I breathe him in while he rocks me back and forth.

"Ell," I whisper.

"Shh." His voice is barely audible as he presses his lips to my neck.

The tears come back, more forceful this time than before. "You can't—"

He cuts me off with a harsh look. This upset, I'm having trouble controlling my voice. If I'm not careful, I'll give us away.

"I had to see you," he whispers in my ear. "I heard you crying earlier. I couldn't leave you alone."

Instead of responding, I bury my face in Elliot's neck. I'm not sure how long we have, and I need to soak in every second of this.

"What if you get caught?" I whisper once I've swallowed down the lump in my throat.

"Then I'll take whatever punishment they give me."

At that, I pull back and shake my head. Ludo has been cruel, but this is only the beginning. We don't need to give him another reason to hurt us more.

"I'll be fine," he murmurs before pressing his lips to mine.

Elliot kisses me gently, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. I shiver at his cold touch at the same time that I lean into it.

"You have to go," I whisper. "Someone is going to catch you."

"No one is coming in, Ol. The guards don't have any reason to check on us until they give us food in the morning."

But my heart is beating wildly, my thoughts a chaotic mess of *what ifs.* I can't watch him get hurt.

“Just for a few minutes,” Elliot whispers. He guides me to the mattress, and we both stretch out on it.

As he brings an arm around me to pull me into him, I find myself relaxing. Somehow, even though this is wildly reckless, I feel safer with his body pressed against mine.

“I love you,” I whisper, my hand running over his hair. “God, Ell, I love you so much, and I’m so sorry.”

“Shh.” Elliot’s hand stroking down my spine is so achingly familiar. “Close your eyes.”

I do, half wondering if I have the mental strength to convince myself that we’re safely in bed at home. Before the thought has fully crossed my mind, I know the answer is no. My heart is broken, and fear is a constant presence in the back of my mind. There’s no way I can get past that.

“Just let me hold you while you fall asleep,” Elliot says softly.

“But what if *you* fall asleep? What if someone sees you in here in the morning?”

His lips are soft as they feather over my forehead. “I’ll stay awake. I promise.”

Elliot sounds exhausted, but not the way he does when he’s close to falling asleep. His voice is worn down and heavy, much like it’s been for the past couple months.

“This isn’t your fault,” I tell him as quietly as I can.

“Don’t worry about that, O.” He squeezes me. “Just try to relax.”

Nestling my face against his chest, I close my eyes. They’re swollen from crying, but my tears have dried up—for now, at least. As I try to do what Elliot told me and relax, I slip my hand underneath his shirt. I want to feel *him*, not fabric.

I didn’t think I was tired enough to sleep, but with Elliot’s body cradling mine, I find myself drifting off after what feels like twenty minutes. He’s strong yet soft, and always so comforting.

“I love you,” he murmurs as he presses a kiss to my temple.

I tuck the words into my mind, savoring the meaning in Elliot’s voice.

For all I know, that’s the last time I’ll ever hear him say it.

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Chapter Three

Rhett

I never told her I loved her.

My heart aches as the thought flits through my mind for the hundredth time since Ludo revealed he knew we betrayed him. I've been worried sick about Wren. We have no clue where she is or how long she'll be able to stay in hiding for. With Finn helping her, she'll probably be fine, but Ludo will stop at nothing to find her.

What if I never get the chance to tell her? What if I die before I'm ever able to see her again? What if Oliver and Elliot are already dead?

More repeating thoughts. They make me sick to my stomach as I grip the balcony's railing and stare out over the yard.

I spent the entirety of yesterday locked up in Aubrey's old bedroom. Someone brought me food, but I refused to eat it. I don't want anything from Holloway, nor am I sure that I trust it.

This morning, I woke up and enjoyed a few blissful moments of comfort before reality came crashing down on me. The comfortable mattress and soft sheets tricked me into thinking I was home.

Now, the spring air envelops me as I watch Holloway's men patrol the perimeter of the yard. It seems that our betrayal has triggered Ludo to be even more cautious. He's at least doubled the amount of men he has outside since the wedding.

I sigh. Without a clock, I'm unsure of what time it is. Sometime around nine, probably, given that the sun rose a couple hours ago.

It doesn't matter, I realize bitterly. *Time doesn't mean anything anymore.*

Maybe it will one day if we can find a way out of here. For now, though, I'm left studying the patterns of the guards and straining to hear conversations that could mean anything. If we try to escape, we *have* to make sure we're successful, or my brothers will die.

We'll *all* die.

My grip on the railing tightens as images of Oliver and Elliot's tortured, mangled corpses flit through my mind. I can't think like that. As far as I know, they're still alive. If I can cling to that, maybe I can find a way to save us.

It's the least you can do, you selfish, uncaring bastard.

We wouldn't be in this damn position if it weren't for me. If I could've found a way to be satisfied with Ludo's death and *only* his death, then this would all be far in the past. We could've killed Ludo years ago and moved on.

Instead, I've subjected us to a decade of misery. None of us have been able to fully heal from Sammy's death because I wanted to draw out Ludo's suffering. I put the people I love the most through hell, and for what? We failed.

They're going to die because of you.

I grit my teeth, wishing I could untangle my father's voice from the thoughts spinning around in my head.

Useless.

No good.

All your fault.

The bedroom door opens, and I whip around at the sound. Two men step inside, both tall with broad shoulders.

"Let's go," one of them says.

I step into the room, closing the balcony doors behind me. "Where?"

"Now," he bites out.

Of course I'm not getting an answer.

Crossing the room, I feel my muscles tense as I wait for the men to grab me, but they don't. One leads me down the hallway, and the other trails behind us.

"Where are we going?" I ask again.

"You're going to meet your brother," the guy in front of me says. "He doesn't know you're a prisoner here. He thinks you're a guest, and that's how it's gonna stay. You understand?"

It's so Benny doesn't get upset. That's what Andrew told me when he and his partner threw me in my bedroom. It didn't make sense to me then because I never thought Ludo would let me anywhere near my brothers.

The man in front of me stops and whips around, his glare intense. "Do you understand?"

"I'm not going to jeopardize my brothers' safety."

"Good." He turns on his heel and continues walking.

A mild form of hope fills me as I follow him. If they're going to let me out of my room, maybe I'll be able to find some way to get us out of here.

I'm not sure how—I'll have to be careful—but it's *something.*

Downstairs, I'm led into the dining room. Holloway is sitting at one end of the table, leisurely picking at a cluster of grapes. Based on the light smile on his face, it seems like he's in an unusually good mood.

Axel is on Ludo's left side, but he's not eating. His dark hair is pulled up into its usual bun, showcasing the upside-down cross tattoo on his temple. I'm pretty sure he looks paler than normal, but I could be imagining it.

As I cross the room, Ludo nods to the chair across from Axel. I lower myself into it silently and fold my hands into my lap.

"Please," Ludo says, gesturing to the food laid out on the table. "Eat."

I don't move.

At that, his smile falls, replaced with a menacing stare. "Your brothers will be joining us soon. Eat, Brooks."

Brothers? I have to school my frown. Obviously, most of Ludo's men don't eat with him, so why does Andrew get that privilege? Is it to help Benny feel more at home here, or is it to manipulate me?

Of course it's to manipulate you. That's the whole fucking point.

Grudgingly, I place some fruit on my plate, along with some buttered toast. Food is the last thing on my mind, but I can play along. The other option is one I'd prefer not to dwell on.

"Benny seems to be adjusting fine," Ludo says without addressing me or Axel. "Since I brought Andrew back from his training, Benny has even started liking it around here. Says he prefers it over living with your father."

I swallow down my retort with a gulp of water, setting the glass down on the table much more forcefully than I need to. Some of the liquid sloshes over the side and onto the tablecloth, causing Axel to arch an annoyed brow at me.

“I think getting to know you will do him good,” Ludo says. “He has questions—who I am, why I care enough to help him and Andrew, et cetera. He’s at that age where vague answers don’t satisfy him anymore.”

“And that’s where I come in?” I ask dryly, already knowing exactly what Holloway wants to use me as.

“Learning about who you are will keep Benny distracted and give him something else to think about,” Ludo continues. “I want him happy, of course, and I’m sure you want to get to know your younger brother.”

Translation: the more attached I get to Benny, the less likely I’ll be to try and pull shit behind Ludo’s back.

It’s not like I can refuse the offer, even if I wanted to. And the thing is, I *do* want to get to know Benny. The more he trusts me, the easier it’ll be to convince him to leave with me when the time comes.

“I didn’t think you were the type who cared about a child’s happiness,” I say before I can stop myself.

With a dark chuckle, Ludo takes a long sip of what looks like orange juice. “Makes Andrew easier to manipulate.”

I still. Over the last day and a half, my feelings toward my younger brother have gone from anger to pity to protectiveness before circling back to the beginning. Andrew is young, but what he did was beyond stupid, to the point that it looks malicious.

Yet I’m well aware of the way someone who holds power over you can influence your thoughts and actions with a few simple words. Ludo has Andrew and Benny’s lives in the palm of his hand, and he’s done more to manipulate Andrew than I know. Can I really blame a nineteen-year-old who’s as powerless as I am?

The doors to the dining room open, and a young boy darts in.

“Benny,” Andrew calls, his voice laced with irritation. “Get back here.”

The boy dashes toward the table, where there are still a couple empty place settings. When he sees us—when he sees *me*—he stops short.

“What happened to your face?” he asks just as Andrew strides into the room.

“Benny,” Andrew snaps, his pace brisk and his eyes set with annoyance. “Don’t be rude.”

I smile. It’s been a long time since I interacted with a kid. I forgot how unfiltered they can be.

“Got into a fight,” I say simply.

Benny’s eyes go wide. “Did you win?”

“I . . .” Dropping my gaze to the table, I lower my voice and add in just a hint of disappointment. “No, I didn’t.”

That seems to disappoint Benny. His mouth pulls down into a frown as he slides into the chair next to Axel. A box of cereal is already next to his bowl along with a pitcher of milk.

As Andrew moves toward his brother, Ludo looks between my bruised face and the healing cuts on Andrew’s knuckles. Just as I hoped, he puts the pieces together and smirks. I’ll have to fix things between me and Andrew at some point, but I don’t want Ludo to suspect that. If it looks like we’re fighting, Holloway won’t have any reason to think we’re working together.

Not that we are, of course, but I have to keep my options open.

Andrew sighs as he reaches for Benny. “Your shirt—”

“Stop,” Benny exclaims as he ducks away from Andrew. “I don’t need you to baby me.”

“Your shirt is on inside out,” Andrew replies flatly.

“Whatever.” Rolling his eyes, Benny shoves a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

Something tugs at my heart, making it hard for me to breathe. The boys are acting just like you’d expect two siblings to. As I watch them, it hits me, just how much of their lives I’ve missed out on. No one could ever replace Sammy, but I miss moments like these with her. She always got annoyed when I fussed over her—unless she wanted attention, that is.

God, I miss her.

Under the table, my hand curls into a fist. Ludo has no clue just how well his plan is already working. As far as I can tell, he doesn’t realize he’s the one who took Sammy away from me. He’s entirely unaware of the chain reaction he’s setting off in my head by putting me in the same room as my brothers. Not fully, anyway.

Andrew rounds the table and lowers himself into the seat next to me. He’s as stiff as I am as he wordlessly fills his plate. It doesn’t help that Axel is watching both of us, not even trying to hide the fact that he’s staring.

“Benny,” Ludo says once the kid has finished his cereal. “Do you remember I told you we have a guest?”

Nodding, Benny flicks his gaze to me.

“This is Rhett Brooks.”

“Hey, that’s my last name,” Benny says. He peers at me more closely, a question in his eyes that he doesn’t voice.

“Do you remember that fantasy book you were telling me about?” Andrew asks, and based on Ludo’s sharp glare, I don’t think he’s supposed to be talking right now.

Again, Benny rolls his eyes. “You think I’d forget?”

Andrew ignores the remark. “Remember how you were telling me that the main character—what was his name? Ryan? He—”

“Ryker,” Benny corrects.

“Yeah, so Ryker went on that adventure to—”

“It’s called a *quest*, Drew.”

At that, Axel’s lips twitch, and he coughs into his elbow. His eyes are sparkling as he shares an amused glance with Ludo—although Ludo looks more irritated than anything.

“Whatever,” Andrew grumbles. “Ryker goes on a *quest*, and he discovers he has a sister that he didn’t know about. And she didn’t know about him, either.”

“Yeah, yeah, Amity.” Benny is leaning forward now, his focus fully on his brother. “She helped him discover his powers.”

“Right. Well, before either of us were born, Dad used to be married.”

Ludo settles back in his chair. His previous annoyance is gone now that he’s following Andrew’s train of thought, although he still looks a little impatient.

“Yeah,” Benny says slowly—almost mockingly. “To Mom.”

Andrew shakes his head. “He had a wife before Mom. She died a long time ago.”

Did Richard tell him this? Or did Holloway fill him in? My anger rises as I realize it must’ve been Ludo. *That wasn’t his fucking place.*

“Wait.” Now, Benny turns back to me. “You . . . you’re our brother?”

Silently, I nod. I’m not sure I can control my voice right now. It’s taking everything in me to maintain an appearance of calmness.

“Told you he’d get it,” Andrew says to Ludo. “Yeah, so Benny, Dad—”

“Do we have powers?” Benny blurts. He’s practically vibrating with excitement as his eyes flit from me to Andrew. “Is that what this is about? We have powers like Ryker and Amity?”

“No.” Andrew rubs his face. “How many times have I told you that magic doesn’t exist? Come on, Benny, that’s obviously not what this is about.”

“So you’re just . . . normal?” Benny asks me. His face has fallen, and for the second time this morning, he’s looking at me with disappointment.

It hurts more than I’d like to admit.

“Pretty much,” I say.

“Then why didn’t Dad tell us about you?” Benny demands. “There must be *some* reason, right?”

“I haven’t talked to Richard in over a decade.” I shift uncomfortably. *Do twelve-year-olds know how long a decade is?* “He had you and Andrew secretly. Never told me you two existed. I wish I could explain all the reasons why, but I don’t think—”

“Don’t say you’ll tell me when I’m older,” Benny snaps. “I’m sick of that shit.”

“Benny!” Andrew shoots him a glare. “Watch your mouth.”

“Why don’t *you* watch *yours?”* Benny snaps back. “You’re the one who taught me.”

“Jesus Christ,” Andrew mutters under his breath.

“Enough,” Ludo says as he sits up. “Benny, I invited Rhett here because I thought you’d like to get to know him better.”

Benny narrows his eyes at me. “Have the plans changed? Because I don’t want to live with some stranger. I want to live with Andrew.”

“I’m not here to try to change that,” I say, adding as much reassurance into my voice as I can. “I’m just happy you’ve both found a way to get

away from Richard.”

At that, Benny’s features soften just a touch. “Was he bad to you, too?”

I nod as a lump forms in my throat. There’s absolutely no way I’m spilling my guts to the boys in front of Ludo. It’ll be hard enough without him here, but I have to. It’s a point of connection, a shared experience—one that’ll hopefully earn me at least some of Benny’s trust.

Axel slides his gaze away from me, glancing at his watch before standing. “We have work to do, boss.”

Seemingly satisfied enough with where our conversation is going, Ludo stands. “I’m glad I could bring you three together.”

My stomach twists into knots, and for a moment, I’m worried I’m going to puke up the little food I’ve eaten.

“Thanks,” Andrew says.

“Can you bring me sour gummies again?” Benny asks, grabbing Axel’s sleeve as he stands. “Pleeeeease?”

“That depends,” Axel replies smoothly.

“On what?”

“You already know.” Axel gives him a look. “If Mia tells me you paid attention during your lessons, then I’ll give you some.”

Benny groans and slumps into his chair. I’m surprised by the jealousy that tinges my thoughts as I realize this is an established dynamic between Axel and my little brother. It feels like yet another thing that’s been stolen away from me.

Before exiting the dining room, Ludo pauses and looks me over. I don’t bother hiding my anger this time. He needs to see it—to know that I feel every ounce of pain he wants me to. If I try to hide it, Holloway will only find a way to inflict more.

With a smirk that Benny can’t see, Ludo slips outside, quickly followed by Axel. The moment they’re out of sight, some of the weight on my chest eases. We’re not alone—the two men who brought me here won’t let me out of their sight, I’m sure—but it’s better.

“You okay?” Andrew asks Benny.

“Yeah,” Benny says quietly. He’s staring at me, still slouched in his seat, and I don’t think the sadness in his eyes has to do with the gummies. “You really didn’t know about us?”

“I wouldn’t’ve abandoned you,” I say softly.

“And you’re really . . . you’re really my brother?”

“Half,” Andrew corrects. “Mom isn’t *his* mom.”

Benny frowns. “Does that matter much?”

“Depends on who you ask,” I reply. “What you think about it is up to you.”

“Are you a lot like Dad?” Benny asks hesitantly.

“I don’t think so.” With a sad smile, I lean forward. “I try not to be.”

Benny glances to Andrew for confirmation, and Andrew shrugs.

“I don’t know much about him either.”

“Why didn’t Dad tell us?” Benny’s hands ball into small fists on the table. “That’s not fair!”

“We’ll talk about Richard soon,” I say, “but not today. For now, let’s focus on each other. I wish I’d been there for all of your life, but I’m just happy to be here now.”

Not entirely the truth—I wish our current circumstances were different—but Benny seems mostly oblivious. If I can try to reduce how traumatizing this is for him, I want to. And talking about Richard . . . I’m going to need some time to figure out how to do so tactfully.

“I guess that’s true,” Benny says, his tone turning contemplative. “It’s really nice that Mr. Holloway brought you here.”

All my thoughts come to a grinding halt. *Fuck.*

Of course Benny sees Ludo as a good person. He’s given Benny a place to stay, and he’s promised to help Andrew get custody of him. If someone had come along and gotten me and Sammy out from Richard’s care when we were younger, I would’ve looked up to them, too.

It sounds like they got off to a rocky start considering Benny didn’t know what was happening at first, but he’s come around. He *likes* Ludo—sees him as his hero.

“Yeah,” I say thickly, knowing full-well that Holloway’s men will report every word of this conversation back to him. “Really nice.”

I have to find a way to get us out of here.

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Chapter Four

Oliver

When I wake up, light is pouring in through the windows, and Elliot is gone. My heart breaks all over again at the same time that relief fills me. However much I wish his body was still pressed against mine, climbing from window to window in broad daylight is like *asking* to get caught.

There's a small bathroom attached to this room, so I shower to clean off the sweat that came with my night of shitty sleep and stress dreams. When I come back into the bedroom, there's a plate with some food on it and a glass of water.

My anxiety was through the roof yesterday, but surprisingly, I'm not worried about Holloway poisoning our food. I doubt our betrayal hurt his feelings—don't think he has any—but we wounded his pride. When he kills us, it'll be in a much more dramatic way than killing us without us realizing.

That'd be too easy. Too merciful.

My window is still open some. I'm sure Elliot had trouble closing it considering he had to maintain his balance. The fresh air is nice, even if it

serves to remind me that I can't go outside.

I eat my breakfast in silence. It's only a couple scrambled eggs that are completely cold by the time I dig into them, but I'm happy to have something to fill my stomach.

"Is there *anything* cool about you?"

My eyes dart to the window at the young voice drifting in. At the low, tired laugh that follows, I scramble to my feet. I'd know that laugh anywhere.

Rhett.

Rushing to the window, I peer outside. He's in the backyard with a young boy, who I'm assuming is Benny. Two men follow behind them, close enough to overhear their conversation.

"I guess that depends," Rhett says. "What do you think is cool?"

"Magic powers," Benny replies, "but you don't have any of those."

"What about fighting skills?" Rhett asks.

"Like with swords? I want to learn how to fence like Inigo Montoya!"

"I don't know much about fencing, although I like him, too." Rhett's voice is smooth—calm. Happy isn't the right descriptor, although I think a part of him is. He finally gets to be with Benny, after all.

"Then what *do* you know?" Benny asks impatiently.

"How to fight with my hands."

"Oh! Like wrestling? Drew did that in high school."

"Sure. I can show you some basic moves if you'd like."

"Will your bodyguards let you?" Cautiously, Benny peers around Rhett to the men who've been trailing behind them. "They won't think I'm trying to hurt you?"

Bodyguards. So that's what Ludo told him to dispel Benny's suspicion about how Rhett is likely never alone.

"No," Rhett says, and the amusement in his tone makes my heart ache. "I don't think they'll be too worried."

"I'm gonna join the wrestling team once I'm old enough," Benny says. "Drew has already taught me a couple things. Well, he's tried. He gets mad really fast when I don't do things right the first time."

"Is that so?"

Rhett and Benny stop in the middle of the yard. It takes everything in me to not call out to them. Most likely, it'd only confuse Benny, which would piss Ludo off.

Look up, I think. *Just look up and see me.*

But Rhett doesn't. His focus is entirely on his younger brother as he teaches Benny a few basic moves. It makes me smile even as the distance between us feels like it's growing. I'm not surprised in the least that we've only been here for two days, and Rhett is already teaching Benny how to defend himself.

Sure, it may be bonding, and it may be what's keeping Benny's attention, but this is what Rhett does. Before we were captured, he was doing the same thing with Wren. It was the best he could do to make sure she could protect herself in case something happens.

I'm not sure how long I stand by the window watching the two of them. With the sun up, it's getting warmer out, so the air isn't carrying that same unpleasant chill as it did last night.

"Aw man, I almost had you!" Benny cries happily.

"You did," Rhett says. "Good job."

I wonder if Ell is watching from the other room.

Moving to the wall, I gently tap on it. Within seconds, Elliot taps back. At least he's awake.

When I return to the window, a woman in a sweater dress is cautiously crossing the lawn. Benny spots her first and waves.

"Miss Mia! This is my brother, Rhett. He's teaching me how to fight!"

"And getting you all muddy, I see." There's no judgment or irritation in her voice. If anything, she seems amused.

Her and Rhett exchange formalities. As Rhett normally does when he's forced into an unexpected social situation, he averts his gaze as often as possible.

Yes. Yes! Now just look over here.

I risk a small wave, but Rhett doesn't see. He's studying the garden, his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

"Do we have to do school today?" Benny asks. "I'd rather hang out with Rhett instead."

"Yes," Mia says with a laugh. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you. Your schoolwork isn't optional."

"We can hang out some other time," Rhett says.

When Mia smiles at him, Rhett looks away. This time, he finally looks upward—and directly into my window. When our eyes meet, his face falls, and the pain in his eyes mirrors my own. His eyes flit to the window next to mine, and his brows furrow. Did he spot Elliot?

"Rhett?" Mia says.

"What?" Rhett rips his gaze away from us. "Sorry, got distracted."

"Benny asked if you could teach him more after his schoolwork is done."

"Uh . . . I think so. I have to check my . . . schedule. But I'll do my best."

That seems to be enough of an answer for Benny. For a split second, it looks like he's going to hug his older brother, but then he decides against it. He follows Mia back inside, but not before sparing Rhett one last glance.

"I'll get to see him again," Rhett asks the men who're now flanking either side of him, "right?"

"That's not for us to decide," one of them replies. "Now move. You're going back to your room."

Huh. So is Rhett locked up like us, but he gets to come out to see Benny? It's the perfect reminder of what's at stake. I wonder if Ludo had them come out into the backyard so Ell and I get the same reminder, too.

Rhett has no choice but to cross the yard. It's as painful as it was being torn from him the first time. He's able to manage one more glance toward us, his expression holding an apology. I give him my best smile before he disappears inside.

Once he's out of sight, the tears come back. With my back to the wall, I sink to the floor and bury my face in my knees.

I'm sorry too, Rhett. I wish I'd listened to you.

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Chapter Five

Elliot

That night, I'm about to sneak over to Oliver's room again when my door opens. I freeze with my hands on the windowsill. Thankfully, I'm in an innocent enough position that it just looks like I'm staring out the window, but damn. That was close—too close.

Light floods the room, and I slowly turn and lean against the sill. Axel is already inside, dressed in dark clothing that makes his skin look even paler than normal.

"It's time," he says, tossing my boots onto the floor.

The dread I've been pushing aside bubbles to the surface, cold and dark. As I put on the shoes and lace them up, I try to swallow it down again.

Whoever he has you kill, you can handle it. You have to—for them.

Axel tosses me a jacket once I've straightened. "Let's go."

"Who's my target?" I ask, mostly for Oliver's sake. If he's still awake, this way, he'll know why I'm being taken away.

When Axel doesn't respond, I sigh and follow him silently down the hallway. The men guarding mine and Oliver's doors eye me cautiously as I

pass.

So much for getting to see him tonight.

Axel leads me downstairs and into the front foyer. There, Holloway is waiting for us with a smug glint in his eye.

“It brings me much pleasure to see you reduced to this, Hayes,” he says as I step off the stairs.

I don’t respond, biting my tongue to keep my retorts at bay. Earlier today, I saw Rhett in the backyard with a young boy who I’m assuming is Benny. It was just the reminder I needed to keep me in my place.

Seeing Rhett with his younger brother also helped me to piece together some of Holloway’s thought process. It seems like I’m the only one doing any jobs for Ludo. He knows I’m the brains behind our operations, and he also knows that I’m the more stable one.

Giving Rhett any type of freedom could backfire if he can’t control his impulses to get us all out of here. Sometimes Oliver acts first and thinks later, too. And since he’s not on his meds, his anxiety could cause him to freeze up in the moment.

So this is Ludo’s plan—give us tiny glimpses of each other but keep us apart so we can’t work together. Have Rhett spend time with his brothers so Benny stays occupied and doesn’t cause problems. And force me to do whatever Holloway wants me to so nothing happens to the boys *or* Oliver.

“Just the one job, Holden,” Ludo tells Axel. “Bring Elliot straight back, and *don’t* let him out of your sight.”

“You got it, boss.”

“And Elliot,” Ludo calls as we head out the front door. “Remember what happens if you try anything behind his back.”

My nails dig into my palms. “I won’t forget.”

A black SUV is parked out front. I climb into the passenger seat. Of course I won't attempt to escape *now*, but I'm sure to take in my surroundings. I only have a view of the backyard from my room, and seeing the front gives me a fuller picture of how many men Ludo has stationed outside now.

Too many.

"You know," I say as Axel pulls out onto the street, "one of the reasons we excel at our job is because we're given time to research and prep beforehand."

"Folder is on the backseat," is all he says.

Once I've grabbed it, I flip through the pages. There's a photo of a middle-aged woman who looks vaguely familiar, along with her name, address, and other details.

"Why does Ludo want her dead?" I ask.

Of course, I don't get an answer.

"Do I at least get a weapon?" I grouse.

"If the answer is yes, will you kill me?"

"If I could get away with it." I shoot Axel a knowing glare. "But we both know if I return without you in perfect condition, an innocent twelve-year-old pays the consequences."

A muscle in Axel's jaw twitches, and his gaze hardens as he stares out the windshield. *Odd.* Does Axel not agree with Ludo's plans?

"She's staying at a motel about twenty minutes away," Axel says, his voice icy.

"Sounds like an easy enough kill. Why does Ludo need me?"

"She's not alone."

Ah.

“Bodyguards?”

“Two. One is in the room, and the other will be in a vehicle in the parking lot keeping watch.”

“And the motel is the best place? We can’t wait until they leave?”

“Ludo wants her dead before sunrise.”

Of course.

“Again with the prep, Axel. I need to know more about her bodyguards—more about the motel. More about *her.* There’s barely anything in here.” I gesture to the folder.

“I’ll make sure management gets your complaints,” Axel replies dryly.

Fucking hell. We always try to minimize collateral damage, but this time around, I don’t have a choice. Using a gun would be the most efficient, but even with a suppressor, it’ll wake the neighbors. I’m sure I’ll be able to get out in time, but it’s not ideal.

Who am I kidding? *Ideal?* None of this is ideal. It’s stupid for me to even wish for it.

“There will also be a man in bed with her,” Axel tells me. “You can hurt him if necessary, but keep him alive. Ludo doesn’t care about the bodyguards.”

Great. This just keeps getting worse and worse.

By the time we’re pulling into the motel parking lot, I’ve come up with a couple different ideas, but they all depend on the room layout and the positioning of the bodyguard who’s inside the room—things I won’t know until it’s already too late.

You can do it. You just have to be quick.

Axel tosses me a ski mask, which I shove into the pocket of my jacket. For my plan, I won’t be able to use it at first. I’ll have to keep my head

down and hope that it's dark enough that no one will get a good look at my face.

When Axel places a handgun on the center console, I sigh.

"No suppressor?"

He shakes his head.

"Does Ludo *want* me to get caught?" I bite out.

"He's confident in your abilities." After the slightest pause, Axel's gaze cuts to mine. "And your motivations."

Visions of strangling Axel fill my mind, but I know I can't act on them. Instead, I take the gun in my hand and check the chamber. "I'll need a key."

"Don't have one."

"Not one to the room. Literally any key."

Axel narrows his eyes at me before reaching into his pocket and pulling out his keychain. He fiddles with it for a moment before placing a single key into my waiting hand. "Room seventeen. Don't fuck up, Hayes."

"I won't."

Before reaching for the door, my eyes sweep over the parking lot. There's a sedan parked nearby that's facing the motel, and I can just barely make out someone inside. No doubt, he's watching our vehicle, and it's possible he's already notified the second bodyguard of us. Considering it's two in the morning, it's worth keeping an eye on any vehicles that pull in close to their room.

However, I can take advantage of the fact that it's so late. Before getting out of the car, I tuck the gun out of sight and slip the key into my pocket. Axel is watching me suspiciously as I slide out of the vehicle and pretend to lose my balance.

Keeping my head low, I stumble along the sidewalk until I get to room seventeen. I make a show of falling into the door before fishing the key from my pocket and trying to shove it into the doorknob. Obviously, it doesn't fit, but that's not the point.

Behind me, I hear a car door shut quietly, and then the sound of footsteps gradually getting closer.

"Come onnnnnn," I groan after a few seconds. "Go in already."

A heavy hand grips my shoulder. "Wrong room, bud. Move along."

"No," I mumble, making a show of turning the key upside down and trying to insert it into the lock.

The guy sighs. "What room number are you?"

"This one." I try again and kick the door when it doesn't budge.

"Listen man, you've got the wrong room." He eases his way in between me and the door and crosses his arms. "Move the fuck on."

"Shit, I've got the wrong key." I fumble with my jacket, hoping I'm making enough of a commotion.

Just as I'm beginning to worry that my plan might not work, I hear the door unlocking, and then it opens an inch or two. An annoyed, large man is on the other side.

"Hey, why the hell are you in my room?" I demand as I reach into my jacket and grab my gun. "I've got my key right here."

They exchange an annoyed glance, probably preparing to remove me by force. I take the split second of distraction to pull out my gun and shoot both of them in quick succession.

They hit the ground, and I grab the ski mask from my pocket and pull it over my head. Shouts sound from one of the rooms as I kick open the door and flip the light switch on.

When I step into the room, my heart sinks. I was hoping for a loveless marriage type situation, but apparently, my luck has run out. The third man—the husband—has his wife backed up to the wall on the far side of their bed. He's shielding her with his body, weaponless and wide-eyed.

"Who sent you?" he demands.

"Move out of the way," I snap. With the amount of noise I've made, I need to get the hell out of here.

He presses his wife farther into the wall. "You're not touching her."

"You can step aside and remain unharmed, or we can do this the hard way." Moving closer, I cock the gun. "I have no problems with hurting you, too."

"No!" The cry doesn't come from him—it comes from his wife. She shoves him out from in front of her, her face stricken. "Don't hurt—"

The shot echoes in the room, so loud my ears ring. As I watch her body drop to the ground, my stomach twists. That's the type of thing Wren would've done. Mere weeks ago, she *did* do that, when Andrew threw that knife at me.

"No," the man yells. He grabs his wife as she crumples to the floor, but it's already too late. She's gone.

Wren. I stumble backward, blinking rapidly to clear my vision.

It's not her. She's safe.

The sound of distant sirens cut through the air. It snaps me back into reality, to the sobbing man cradling his dead wife in his arms. Without another glance, I bolt out the door, careful not to touch it and leave fingerprints behind.

Axel still has the car running. He takes off before I've even shut the passenger side door. "You couldn't've gone any faster?" he growls.

“Seriously?” I spit out. “I wasn’t even in there for two minutes.”

I don’t hear his retort. My mind is stuck, replaying those few seconds over and over again. The way he refused to let me near her. How she jumped in front of him. The terror on her soft features—but also the love.

When Rhett, Ol, and I decided to start taking jobs, we set a couple rules for ourselves. The first is that we wouldn’t kill anyone who didn’t deserve it. What was the point in avenging Sammy if we were going to end up as heartless as Holloway in the end?

For the most part, we’ve maintained that promise to each other. We’ve always been picky about which hit jobs we accept. But now, I don’t have a choice. Of course I don’t know who that woman was, but I have a feeling she didn’t deserve to die like that.

I’m not sure how long it takes for me to pull myself out of my downspiral. When I resurface, I realize we’re not heading back to Ludo’s mansion. I have a general idea of where the motel was, and I recognize a few buildings as we drive past. We’re heading in the opposite direction of Ludo’s home.

My mouth opens, a question on my tongue, but then I think better of it. Axel hasn’t given me any information tonight other than what I’ve needed to know. I’ll probably learn more by keeping my mouth shut and my eyes wide open.

Once we’re outside the city limits, Axel pulls into an abandoned gas station. There’s a white van on the far end of the parking lot with the words “Philadelphia Commercial Hood & Fire Systems” painted on the side.

That’s odd.

“For fuck’s sake,” Axel grumbles as he pulls up closer to the van. “Does no one know how to be discreet anymore?”

Commercial hoods and fire systems. Like for restaurants? What does Axel want with them?

"Stay here," he tells me lowly. He puts the SUV in park before getting out and closing the door quietly.

I narrow my eyes. Before we left, Ludo gave Axel two orders. One, do the job and come straight back. Two, don't let me out of his sight. Axel hasn't followed either of those instructions.

As Axel yanks open the backseat door, two men get out of the van. They look nervous as hell, glancing around the dark parking lot while they wait.

"This is half," Axel says, tossing them the duffel bag that was in the backseat. "You'll get the other half when the job's done."

One of the men grabs the bag while the other asks, "Time and place haven't changed?"

"Correct. But for the love of god, bring an unmarked vehicle. Don't be idiots." Axel holds up his hand when the men start muttering excuses. "I don't want to hear it. Just do what I say."

They nod silently, not taking their eyes off him.

They're scared of him.

Without another word, Axel marches back to the SUV, climbs in, and drives off. My mind is brimming with questions, but I keep my mouth clamped shut.

Neither of us utter a single word for the remainder of the drive. The silence gives me time to sort through my thoughts. Whatever just happened, I don't think Ludo knows about it, which can only mean one thing.

I don't think Axel is who we think he is.

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Chapter Six

Wren

The old, wooden steps creak under my weight as I slowly descend to the first floor of the farmhouse. My mind is foggy from lack of sleep since my nightmares have only gotten worse over the past week.

The night Ludo's men tried to abduct me, Finn and I ran. He called a friend to come deal with the bodies, and then we gathered up anything that gave away our plans for Ludo. Laptops, drives, blueprints—*everything.*

We brought it all with us to Finn's farmhouse. It's the same one I visited mere weeks ago when Rhett tortured and killed Austin. Apparently, it's where Finn has been living for the past year. I'm still unsure of who he's been hiding from, but for the time being, my focus is on other things.

For now, I'm just grateful that we have a place to hide. Finn has access to the guys' security system—specifically, the cameras they have installed outside. So we know that after the first failed kidnapping attempt, Holloway sent another team to the guys' mansion. When they didn't find me, it looks like they searched the house, but we'd already cleared it of any important information.

We're safe, and we've kept the guys' secrets out of Ludo's hands. Unfortunately, that's all we've managed to do.

I rub at the never-ending ache in my chest. *What if we're already too late?*

The stairs empty into the family room, and Maggie is waiting by the back door. When she spots me, she lifts her head up from where it was resting in between her paws.

"Hey, girl."

She whines softly as I approach. After I scratch her behind the ears for a minute, I open the sliding door that leads onto the covered porch. Cool air rushes in, causing goosebumps to form on my skin.

Maggie bounds across the porch and into the backyard. The first time she did it, I thought she'd keep running and never come back, but Finn assured me she was fine. He told me German Shepherds need at least two hours of exercise a day, and she loves running around the huge yard.

I quickly learned that she's a well-trained dog. Even when she's playing in the yard, she never wanders out of sight—at least not for too long. She always comes back, panting and wagging her tail and often covered in mud.

For a few seconds, I watch Maggie sniff around the yard. The air is thick with a low-hanging fog that'll burn off in an hour or two. The sun is just beginning to shine through the trees, causing the dew on the grass to sparkle.

A dull ache blooms in my head, so I close the door and move into the bathroom. There are pain pills in the medicine cabinet, so I take a few before thoroughly washing my hands.

The lotion I've been using is in here, too, so I squirt some onto my fingers and rub it into the back of my neck. I wasn't prepared for how itchy the skin would be at this point in the healing process, but Finn told me it's normal.

There was a part of me that wanted to delay getting the butterfly tattoo until the guys are safe, but then I realized I couldn't wait. In a way, it helped me feel closer to them again. I'm not sure how else to explain it, other than it felt right.

It took some convincing to get Finn to let me leave the farmhouse, though. He's been adamant that I stay hidden, and getting my tattoo has been the only exception so far. I think a part of him understood that I needed to do it. Underneath his grumpy, hard exterior, he has a heart, so we took some extra precautions for the appointment.

Once I've rubbed the lotion in, I move toward the kitchen to make some coffee. On my way, I pass the dining room, and I find Finn poring over a laptop. The room is dark, but the screen illuminates his pale face. His hair is mussed, and the bags under his eyes are concerningly darker than they were a few days ago.

"Hey. You want some coffee?" I ask.

He doesn't respond—doesn't even blink.

"Finn."

Nothing.

With a sigh, I flip on the light switch.

"FUCK!" Finn cringes and buries his face in the crook of his elbow to shield his eyes from the light. "What the hell, Wren?"

"You weren't answering me. Did you even go to bed last night?"

"What time is it?" Lowering his arm, Finn squints at his phone. "Shit. I thought it was, like, two."

"You have a clock on your laptop."

"I hid it. It was annoying me."

"You didn't hear Maggie whining to go outside?"

At that, he jumps to his feet. “Fuck. *Fuck.*”

“I let her out.” Tiredly, I lean against the doorframe. “I can feed her, too. You should get some rest.”

“Yeah, I just have to . . .” Finn’s gaze drops to the program he has pulled up on his laptop, but then he shakes his head and closes it out. “Never mind. It won’t do any good.”

“What?”

“I was gonna check the security footage at the house again, but it’s no use. Even if Ludo sent another team to look through everything again, they won’t find anything, nor does it really matter.”

Slowly, I nod. We’ve both been monitoring a variety of things since the guys were captured. Refreshing Aubrey’s social media, re-checking messages with Sparrow, etc. Nothing particularly helpful—it feels like we’re treading water.

“I’ll keep working,” I tell him. Last night, I was going through some of Holloway’s books, and there were some records that confused me. Initially, I brushed it off as me not being smart enough to figure out the numbers, but I want to double-check. “Maybe I’ll find something.”

“Yeah,” Finn mutters, but his tone isn’t convincing.

I get it. We’ve hit dead end after dead end, and we’re no closer to bringing the guys home. There’s so much on the hard drive, and there didn’t seem to be a good starting point. We still have an overwhelming amount of folders and files to look through.

It’s been a week since Ludo took Elliot, Rhett, and Oliver. As far as we can tell, he’s keeping them at his mansion, but we could be wrong. Our only indicator is that’s the last place we were able to track their phones to before

they went offline. It's possible Ludo is keeping them elsewhere, but if that's the case, he hasn't been going to see them.

Since I have to stay in hiding and Finn refuses to leave me alone, we've had to call in help. Sparrow has been happy to do whatever she can. She has a large network of people who owe her favors, and she wants Ludo dead just as much as the rest of us.

With her on our side, we've had a team of people discreetly watching Holloway's mansion, so we know he hasn't left since the wedding. He can't. To everyone outside his inner circle, he's happily on his tech-free honeymoon far from Philadelphia. We were able to get confirmation that he's still here, but he's keeping a low profile until the "honeymoon" is over.

Axel, however, has come and gone quite a bit. A couple nights ago, one of Sparrow's people tailed him to a motel. Elliot was with him, and according to Sparrow's report, he killed three people. We aren't sure why, but I know Ludo had plans to force the guys to do certain jobs for him. I bet that was one of them.

"Were you able to get any sleep?" Finn asks. "No offense, but you look like shit."

I snort. "Don't look in the mirror, then."

He grunts in response, shooting me a grumpy glare.

Last night, I gave up on trying to get any work done a little after twelve. Sleep evaded me for hours thanks to the hundred terrifying scenarios that played through my head. I couldn't get my thoughts to calm down.

They're already dead.

He forced them to watch, just like Jordan was planning on forcing them to watch you.

They went through an eternity of pain, and it's all your fault.

Once I was finally able to drift off, I had an hour or two of fitful sleep before the nightmares kicked in. That seems to be the pattern my nights are falling into.

Thankfully, I haven't woken up screaming my head off. I don't want to scare Finn or Maggie, nor do I want Finn to feel like he has to comfort me. He's already doing enough.

"Don't forget to eat," Finn mumbles as he shuts his laptop. "And wake me if you get an update from Sparrow."

"Will do."

Once Finn is upstairs, I go about making myself some coffee and a light breakfast. And by light breakfast, I mean a plain bagel that I can't even bring myself to throw in the toaster. I nibble on it as I move the stuff I'll need into the family room.

Finn may prefer working in the dining room, but there aren't any windows in there, so I hate it. Before I settle in, I glance out into the backyard. Maggie is happily exploring, so she'll be fine for now. I'll check on her in a little bit.

Opening the laptop, I lower myself to the couch. I stare at the bagel, trying to coax myself to take another bite, but I can't do it. The thought of eating in general makes me grimace.

At least drink your coffee.

With a sigh, I pick up the mug and stare at the liquid inside. Its aroma is sweet, and the color is a light brown. It looks the same as Oliver's coffee whenever I make it for him. He takes a little more sugar than I do, but we both take the same amount of cream.

If you'd just been more careful, you could be in bed cuddling with him right now.

The thought stings, and when I shove it away, another springs up with double the force.

Stupid girl. You thought you could help them, and now look what you've done.

Apparently, while Finn and I were getting information out of one of my would-be kidnappers before I killed him, I zoned out for a few minutes. In that time, the man explained that the guys got caught because I was spotted entering Ludo's office.

It's all your fault.

My coffee burns as I take a large gulp. It has the desired effect, forcing my mind to focus on the physical pain instead of the barrage of cruel thoughts.

There. Now focus.

It takes me a minute to find the documents I downloaded from Holloway's hard drive. There are so many of them, and quite a few have similar names, the only difference being a different month or year.

When I first learned of the hard drive, I wondered why Ludo kept evidence of his crimes at all. The moment I actually looked at what's on it, though, it all clicked.

This shit is *complicated.* There's no way he could remember this all in his head. If he doesn't have a way to keep track of where all his money and product goes, he's bound to make mistakes—or get ripped off unknowingly.

Or, I think as I find the records I want and check the numbers again, *forget just how much he's ripping off others.*

By itself, the document in front of me doesn't mean much. It's a fairly simple report on money in and money out for a specific trade that happens once a month.

It seems that, for this particular portion of Holloway's business, he's in with two other men—Raymond King and Fredrick Burbank. They seem to be suppliers, and Ludo seems to be the middleman. A distributor of sorts who then splits his earnings with the other two men.

For what, I'm not sure—drugs, probably? Maybe weapons? But at the moment, that's not what I care about. The important thing is the numbers.

They just aren't adding up.

I do a little more digging and find the agreement between Holloway, King, and Burbank. They're supposed to split the money evenly between the three of them, but looking at the reports, that's not what Ludo is doing.

Again, doubt trickles through my consciousness. Am I doing the math wrong? Are there expenses that are accounted for elsewhere? Maybe I'm not understanding the agreement?

I wish Ell was here.

Fuck. Don't think about him.

Quickly, I take another gulp of my coffee. It's not as hot, so the burn isn't as strong, and I sigh in disappointment. *Whatever.* I just need to keep working. Who knows how much time we have left?

Were there invoices?

Again, I start going through all of Holloway's records from the past year. If I can confirm that the amounts he paid to Raymond and Fredrick are off, then it's a start at least.

If it even matters.

Uncovering that Ludo is lying to at least two of his business partners is . . . *something.* I'm not sure what we'll be able to do with the information, but hopefully it can help somehow. Maybe they'll want revenge, and we could

convince them to help us? But what if they don't believe us, or Ludo finds out what we did and kills the guys—or Benny—before we can get to them?

Maybe Finn will have a better idea when he wakes up. I'm hoping that he'll be able to help me figure out if I'm right or not since he has a better understanding of how all this stuff works. I'm a barista with an English degree, for fuck's sake. I don't know anything about distributing illegal substances or even how to run an above-board business.

It takes me a while, but I'm able to find separate records of payments for the past six months. Thankfully, it confirms my suspicions. Ludo is under-reporting his earnings to Raymond King and Fredrick Burbank so he can keep more than his fair share.

But what can we do with that?

Absentmindedly, I reach for my phone. My actual one is still at the guys' mansion—we didn't want to risk Ludo possibly tracking it if he has the ability—so Finn got me another one for temporary use. I pull up Aubrey's Instagram like I've done dozens of times in the past week, except this time, there's finally a new post.

Straightening, I swipe through the photos. Some of them are of her, some are of things like sunsets and food and little shops, and there's even one of her and Ludo together. There's no destination tagged, nor is it obvious from the photos. According to what she told me, they're some of the pictures she saved up to post to make their marriage look real.

Once I've looked through the photos, I expand the caption: *We were supposed to have a tech-free week, but my love snuck a camera into his bag. Can't say I'm upset.*

The post already has a decent amount of likes and a couple comments. That's good—it means Aubrey's plan is working. However much I wish she

was here with me now, I'm glad she's safe and doesn't have to worry anymore.

Maggie whines at the back door, so I get up and let her in. I already put food in her bowl, and after she gets some water, she eats it all quickly.

Sighing, I glance at the laptop. There has to be some way we can use this information to our benefit. I'll talk to Finn when he wakes, but for now, maybe I can come up with something on my own.

"You want to go on a walk, Mags?"

Her ears perk up at my question. I'm hoping that being outside and moving around will help me think better. After grabbing Maggie's leash, we head out the back door.

We're not completely in the middle of nowhere out here—there's a house every half mile or so—but I feel relatively safe. According to Finn, this house isn't even in his name. If Ludo or his men were able to make the connection between me and him, they still wouldn't be able to find us here.

So I head toward the woods without much worry. It's quiet out here—peaceful in a way I'm not used to. Birds chirp, squirrels leap from branch to branch, and there's even a small creek that cuts through the trees.

I think Rhett would like it out here.

The thought pops into my mind before I can stop it. Immediately, any feeling of calm vanishes, replaced by pain that's so deep-rooted it's impossible to ignore. Tears fill my eyes, and I have to stop just as I step onto one of the paths Finn showed me the other day.

Maggie waits by my side patiently, nudging me with her head when I sob. In all my life, I don't know if I've ever felt so empty.

My knees hit the muddy ground, sharp pain shooting through my legs at the impact. "What if I can't fix this? Oh, Maggie, what if I never see them

again?”

With a low whine, Maggie sniffs at my hair. I bury my face into her neck while my tears flow freely. If we can’t rescue the guys, can I go on without them? Can I move on, knowing I’m the reason they died?

I can’t. I can’t do this.

There’s no way I’ll be able to live with myself.

“Wren?”

Finn’s voice is soft, but it still startles me. I jump before turning to look up at him. He’s dressed in his usual attire—dark colors with his leather jacket unzipped. Unsurprisingly, his hair is still messy.

“What are you doing out here?” Embarrassed, I wipe at my eyes.

“Couldn’t sleep. Heard you and Maggie leave and thought you might want some company. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s fine.” Sniffling, I stand. “Actually, since you’re awake, I think I found something that could be helpful.”

“If you need a couple minutes—”

“I need *them,*” I yell. I don’t mean to, but it’s the only way I can get the words out without my voice breaking.

Finn doesn’t seem hurt or offended. If anything, I think he understands. I haven’t forgotten the way he looked in the farmhouse’s basement those few weeks ago.

At least I didn’t lead her to her death. She deserved better than you.

That’s what Austin told Finn before Rhett killed him. I don’t know who Austin was talking about, but I don’t need to know. Whoever she was, Finn cared about her, and losing her still haunts him. It’s written on his face even now. He doesn’t want me to meet that same fate, nor does he want to lose the guys.

“All right.” Reaching out, he takes Maggie’s leash from me. “Then let’s head back.”

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Chapter Seven

Rhett

From my first meeting with Benny and on, I eat all my meals with him in the dining room. Andrew is always there for breakfast, but he's usually busy during lunch and supper. Occasionally, Ludo dines with us as well. He never seems to enjoy Benny's company, but I think he wants to check in on how well his plan is working.

As far as I can tell, Benny still fully believes that I'm a guest here, not a prisoner. My bedroom is a couple doors down from his, and he's seen me coming and going on occasion for meals. From his perspective, I'm able to roam the mansion as freely as he's able to.

I don't let myself slip into that line of thinking. My "bodyguards" are a constant reminder of my true place here, as well as the glimpses I'm able to get of Oliver and Elliot.

In the evenings, Benny and I usually end up outside together. Sometimes we play a variety of games—catch, hide and seek, things like that. Usually, though, he's interested in learning how to fight.

I think training with me makes him feel like a warrior in one of his books. I'm happy to teach him. These skills might come in handy whenever we manage to break out of here.

Hopefully not, I remind myself. I'd prefer for there to be no risk to Benny's safety on our way out.

The more time that passes, though, the more I'm wondering if we'll even get the opportunity. Since I'm under constant watch, I have to play it safe. None of Ludo's men will engage in conversation with me, so it's not like I can find someone who'd be willing to help me.

I've also noticed that Andrew has been avoiding me. Whether it's due to his orders or because he still feels guilty, I'm not sure. But the only times we're ever in the same room are when he's with his partner or when Holloway is present.

Well, except this evening, anyway. I sat down to a plateful of mac and cheese—Benny's request, apparently—and when my youngest brother came in, he was dragging Andrew with him.

Now, Benny is on his second helping of pasta, and Andrew is picking at his food while sending me nervous side glances. I'm about to ask what's bothering him when Benny speaks up, his mouth full.

"You said you'd tell me about Dad."

My stomach drops. *Oh.* "Benny, I don't—"

"You promised you'd tell me." He's watching me intently, and the determination on his features is yet another thing that reminds me of Sammy.

"You're right," I say on a sigh. "I did. What do you want to know?"

"Why don't you two talk anymore? And why do you only call him Richard instead of Dad?"

Shifting uncomfortably, Andrew cuts in. “Maybe that’s personal. You’re being rude.”

But Benny ignores him and continues staring at me expectantly.

“When I was your age,” I start, “Richard was . . . abusive. I’m not sure how he’s treated you both, but it doesn’t sound like he’s changed.”

“He’s been a piece of shit my whole life,” Andrew says. “I don’t think he has a kind bone in his body.”

“My mom died when I was young. Some . . . other things happened, and Richard got worse. He was already cruel, so at that point, I was done. I knew I deserved better, and I didn’t want to be around him anymore.

“Little did I know, that’s exactly what he wanted. By then, both of you had already been born. When I moved out, it gave him the opportunity to fully move on—to only have one family to focus on. The one he wanted.”

Guilt passes over Andrew’s face. At being the preferred son? At realizing how hard things were for me compared to him?

“What other things happened?” Benny asks.

“There was . . . well, you see, he . . .”

Shit. I’m not sure this is the best time to talk about Sammy. That conversation should happen later, when I can be fully honest with them both.

“You mentioned we had a sister,” Andrew says. “What happened to her?”

Shit.

“She was killed.”

“What?” Benny’s voice is louder than I’d prefer. “Who killed her?”

“I don’t know. The police never figured it out.” It’s a lie, but it’s what the authorities told us instead of the truth—that they’d been paid off to keep quiet.

Besides, I can’t tell Benny and Andrew that Holloway killed our sister. I’m not sure Andrew would believe me, and it would only scare Benny. And with Ludo’s men in here, it’d reveal things I’m not sure I want to yet.

“It was a wrong place, wrong time kind of situation,” I say, which is true. “She managed to slip away from school one day, and on her way home, she was shot.”

“How old was she?” Andrew asks.

“Younger than Benny.”

Silence fills the room. They both stare at me, not even moving. It’s a lot—finding out you have two secret siblings, only to realize you’ll never get to meet one of them.

“Her name was Samantha,” I say thickly. “She liked playing dress up, she was allergic to strawberries, and she wanted to be a ballet dancer when she grew up.”

“And she’s . . . dead?” Benny asks.

I nod. “Has been for ten years.”

“That’s not fair!” His hands ball into fists on the table. “She shouldn’t’ve been killed!”

“I know.” As much as I want to brush past this so we don’t have to keep talking about Sammy, I don’t try to change the subject. That wouldn’t be fair to either of them. She’s their sister. If they have questions, they deserve answers.

“Getting upset about it isn’t going to do any good,” Andrew tells Benny. “It happened when you were a toddler. Just—”

“Don’t,” I say, cutting Andrew a sharp glare. “He’s allowed to be angry. He’s allowed to feel whatever he wants.”

“Why didn’t Dad have you guys move in with us?” Benny asks angrily. “We could’ve protected her.”

“Because he didn’t want us,” I tell him gently. “I was an accident—one that kept Richard from pursuing the career he wanted for years. I think my parents had Sammy as a way to try to fix their marriage, but it was too late. Richard was already checked out.

“After my mom died, Richard was hardly ever home. I thought he was spending all his time at bars or the like, but now I know he was with you guys.”

Benny’s eyes are shining as he says quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I tell him. “Besides, he didn’t treat us well. Maybe it was for the best that he wasn’t home much.”

“I guess,” Benny mumbles.

“I’m just glad we’ve found each other now,” I say with a smile.

His composure brightens. “And Mr. Holloway will help us find a way to stay together. I can live with Andrew, and you can visit us!”

As I nod, I force my smile to stay on my face. “Yeah. Absolutely.”

Benny goes on, but my mind stays stuck on one thought. We’ll find a way to get out of here, and we’ll make sure Benny doesn’t have to live with Richard again—but it won’t be because of Ludo’s help.

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Chapter Eight

Elliot

A few nights pass before my next job. Since I almost got caught sneaking into Oliver's room, I haven't visited him again. Ludo has left him alone, which is surprising after his comment.

It makes me even more nervous for what's to come.

Just about every evening, I'm able to see Rhett in the backyard with Benny. It makes me wonder if Ludo put us in these rooms intentionally, so we can see him without being able to have any form of communication. Holloway's men would put a stop to it immediately, so we haven't even tried.

Part of me is grateful for the chance to see Rhett—to make sure he's still unharmed. But the rest of me is angry. So, so angry. At myself for letting this happen. At Ludo for forcing us apart. At *everything.*

When Axel comes to collect me again, my steps are heavy with dread. The past few days have been plagued with thoughts of the woman I killed. How much she looked like Wren—*acted* like Wren. It feels like I shot her instead of some stranger.

Axel seems to notice my deteriorated mood. He doesn't make a comment on it, just stares at me for a second longer than he needs to.

Downstairs, Ludo is waiting for us again. When he sees my slumped shoulders and empty gaze, he smiles. "Same deal as last time, Axel. Bring him straight back when he's done."

"Will do." Axel pushes me toward the front door. "This one might take a little longer."

"Just do whatever it takes and call me when the kill is confirmed."

Axel nods silently, and we leave. The same SUV is parked out front, and once I'm inside, I look into the backseat for a folder. There isn't one. As Axel starts the car and pulls through the gate, I look around, thinking maybe it's in the front seat.

"Who am I killing tonight?" I ask when I come up empty handed.

"No one."

"But Ludo said—"

"I hired out the job. Cost me a pretty penny, too. High-profile target, tight deadline—there aren't many hitmen out there who could pull this one off."

"Which is why Ludo wanted me to do it," I say slowly, unsure of what Axel's plan is. Sure, I'm happy I don't have to kill someone, but what the fuck is going on?

"I need tonight to do other things. This job is the perfect alibi."

"I'm not following."

"You don't need to," Axel says smoothly. "You just need to stay close and keep quiet."

My mind scrambles to catch up. The other night, Axel gave those two men a duffel bag that I'm assuming was filled with cash. At first, I thought

he was running an errand for Holloway, but we were supposed to go straight back to the mansion.

Now, I'm even more sure that Axel has more up his sleeve than he's letting on. My heart leaps at the realization that he might not be as loyal to Ludo as I previously thought. Could he help us? *Would* he?

For the time being, I do as he ordered and shut up. Surprise fills me when we pull into a familiar parking garage. We're only a block or two away from the Garden Grille.

"You'll want to keep your head down," Axel tells me. "Wearing a mask will be too conspicuous."

I follow his lead when he exits the vehicle. At first, I think it's just a coincidence that we're so close to the Grille, but then I remember the logo on the van the other night—Philadelphia Commercial Hood & Fire Systems.

What the hell is Axel planning?

As we approach the Garden Grille, two men join us, and I quickly recognize them as the ones Axel paid the other night. They each have a tool bag with them.

"Everything's ready?" one of them asks in a hushed tone.

"The security system has been dealt with, and the cameras aren't a problem," Axel replies quietly. "Williams and Ludo never updated them, so the footage is stored locally instead of in the cloud."

Is he robbing the restaurant? No, he wouldn't need these two guys for that.

Philadelphia Commercial Hood & Fire Systems.

Fire systems.

Oh, shit.

We enter the restaurant from the back. Axel has a key, which feels too easy, but it sounds like he's been planning this for a while. When he opens the door, we're met with complete silence.

"What did you do to the alarm system?" one of the guys asks.

With a smirk, Axel shuts the door behind us. "Made sure the closing manager conveniently 'forgot' to turn it off. Don't worry, she'll keep her mouth shut. I made sure of it."

The two men exchange a nervous glance with each other.

"Remember," Axel says, "don't make it look like it's been sabotaged. Best case scenario is that it appears as if the system was installed improperly or there was a malfunction."

They nod before disappearing into the back.

I'd ask what they're doing, but I've already put it together. They must be fire suppression system techs. Hell, maybe they even installed the system in this building. It makes them the perfect people to have along on this job. They know exactly what equipment they're working with.

"And what about us?" I ask.

"You're not doing anything," Axel replies. "Just stay close."

As we move through the dining room, memories flood my mind. Hours before we killed Edgar Williams, we watched Wren run right into him in this very building. Then we watched her have a rather uncomfortable dinner with Adam and their parents.

God, seeing the way she looked at Thomas had alarm bells going off in all of our heads. She held her own well, though. Even when Adam followed her out of the restaurant and grabbed her in that alley, she managed to defend herself until Oliver came to help her.

"Move, Elliot," Axel snaps. "We don't have much time."

I didn’t realize I’d stopped right outside the swinging doors. Tearing my eyes from the table Wren sat at all those weeks ago, I duck inside.

Axel wastes no time heading to the fryers. With gloved hands, he pulls some tools out of his jacket pocket and gets to work. I’m not sure exactly what he’s doing—I’m a hitman, not an electrician—but I can guess that the thing won’t work right anymore.

There’s no denying that this is a blatant act against Ludo. And, I realize, there’s no way it’s Axel’s first.

“You’re the rat,” I say, “aren’t you? *You’re* Ludo’s rat.”

When Finn told us that Owen Harris was Sparrow’s man on the inside, it just left me with more questions. Someone told Huxley where Aubrey would be while her and Ludo were in Florida, and there’s no way Sparrow would endanger her.

My thought process went two ways—first, Owen Harris wasn’t as loyal as Sparrow thought. Or second, Ludo has more than one rat.

Looking back, it makes perfect sense that it’s Axel. All along, he was trying to convince Holloway that *we* were the ones selling him out. He was trying to make sure the heat stayed off his own back.

He almost got Wren and Rhett killed, I realize, but my anger is short-lived. This is the best chance at freedom we’re going to get. I can’t sacrifice it because Axel has his own motivations.

“This isn’t the time to talk about that,” he snaps. “Just let me work.”

I figure the less time we spend in here, the better, so I do as he says and keep my mouth shut. There are only two fryers, and Axel repeats the same process with the second as he did with the first.

After he finishes closing the fryers back up, his eyes sweep the area before landing on his target. A few steps away from the kitchen is a storage

area. Several jugs of oil sit on one of the bottom shelves. One appears to be open and partially used, although it's still mostly full. Axel carries it into the kitchen and sets it on the counter right next to the fryers.

"Breakers," he mutters to himself, moving out of the kitchen. But then he stops abruptly. "You two done?" he calls to the techs.

"Just finished," one of them calls back.

With a sharp nod, Axel resumes heading to the back of the building. I follow without a sound, although I'm not sure he's paying enough attention to me to notice. I could probably run out the door—shit, I could probably kill him—by the time he realized what I was doing, but I can't. Not with everyone still trapped.

Axel opens up one of the electrical boxes in the back, running his finger along the edge before frowning. Again, I'm not an electrician, but I know that all those are set to on.

Grumbling, Axel slams the door shut and moves on to the next box. In this one, some of the switches are off. He reads the labels before flipping them on and shutting the door.

The two techs come into view, their tool bags in their hands. "Ready?" one of them asks.

"I just have to turn on the fryers." Axel pulls something that looks like a manual out of his jacket as we move toward the kitchen again. When he turns on the fryers, they both beep loudly and continuously. "Oh, shut up."

Peering over his shoulder, I watch as Axel follows the instructions on a page in the manual that's already earmarked. He hits a few buttons, and I briefly see the word "OVERRIDE?" flash across the small screen.

Finally, the beeping stops, and Axel nods. "We're good to go."

"What did you do?" I ask.

“Fucked with the temperature sensors and told it to stop being so sensitive. The heating elements won’t turn off, so they’ll run hotter and hotter until the oil catches fire.” Axel gestures to the jug on the counter. “Then that lights up, and ideally, the whole place burns down.”

“And it’ll look like an accident?”

“No,” Axel says as he brushes past me. “It’ll look like a bad close and a catastrophic coincidence. Let’s move.”

I rush to keep up with him and the techs as they move into the dining room. The kitchen floor is slick, and I slip, barely catching myself. When I straighten, Axel is watching me with a judgmental stare.

“You’ve never worked in food service before? You’ve gotta be careful if you’re not wearing the right shoes.” He doesn’t wait for a response, stalking through the restaurant and out the door.

I don’t realize how hot I am until the cool night air washes over my skin. It seems like this job was thought through, but I was still worried about getting caught.

Axel locks up and hands one of the guys a piece of paper. “You’ll find the rest of your payment at this address.”

After that, we don’t stick around. Only once we’re closed in the SUV do I speak again.

“How long will it take to burn down?”

Axel shrugs. “Long enough for us to get out of here and then some. Now ask what you really want to.”

I swallow. “You’re the one who told Huxley where Ludo and Aubrey would be in Florida.”

“Correct.”

“You could’ve gotten her killed,” I grit out, my fists clenching in my lap.

“Huxley wasn’t planning on hurting her,” Axel says, and he sounds almost bored. “Doesn’t have it in him. He just needed leverage against Holloway, and keeping Ludo from expanding his business happens to also serve my plans.”

I wait, assuming Axel is about to make some type of threat. If he’s going up against Ludo in *any* capacity, the fewer people who know about it, the better. I’m a liability he can’t afford.

But the threat doesn’t come. Instead, a humorless smile forms on Axel’s features as he pulls out of the parking garage. “You look worried, Hayes.”

“Are you *not* about to tell me that if I reveal this to Ludo, you’ll beat me to a bloody pulp?”

“Don’t need to.”

“Oh?” Irritation rises in me, but also curiosity. What does he know that he’s not letting on?

“You could tell Holloway,” Axel says, his voice infused with lazy confidence. “But that’d give him a leg up on me, and I don’t think you want that. Whatever is going on between you, it’s more than just making some quick cash.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Axel snorts. “It’s obvious. If this was just about money, you would’ve helped Aubrey, gotten your cut, and bolted. Sticking around wasn’t worth the risk of getting caught—unless you wanted something else.”

“Maybe,” I say slowly, “but you burning down the Grille doesn’t help me. It’ll piss Ludo off, sure, but it doesn’t get us to safety or anywhere near close to it.”

“Not yet,” Axel corrects. “But this is just one step of many. Eventually, the only thing left of Ludo’s empire will be smoldering ashes, and I’m the

last person he'll suspect lit the match."

In theory, that sounds good, but I doubt Ludo will keep us alive for much longer. I'm serving a purpose for now, but how long will that last?

"Unless you're planning on doing it fairly quickly, we'll be dead before that happens." I cross my arms. "I'll say it again—that doesn't help me at all."

The smile on Axel's face vanishes, and he pulls off onto a dark side street and cuts the headlights. When he turns to me, I can't see most of his face, but his tone is threatening enough. "You can gather all the bargaining chips in the world, and it still won't be enough for Ludo to let you go. This doesn't change anything."

"But you don't know that for sure," I say.

"Don't make me regret hiring someone to do *your* job tonight," he growls.

"I won't," I say quickly. "As long as you let me help you."

Silence fills the SUV for a few seconds before Axel responds, "In exchange for what?"

"You get us out of that damn mansion before he kills us. Andrew and Benny, too."

"That's asking for a lot, Elliot."

I give myself a few seconds to think. To convince Axel to help us, I'll have to play my cards right. Problem is, I don't have many.

"There's a reason you haven't killed Holloway yet," I say. "Something's holding you back."

"I don't want him dead," Axel replies. "I want out. Completely and totally out. I'll have to kill him to do it, and I have no reservations about doing so. I just . . . can't yet."

“Why?” I ask, hoping I’m not pushing him into clamming up. I need to understand his motivations.

Thankfully, Axel seems willing to take a chance on me.

“If Ludo dies, I’m stuck. His men will look to *me* for leadership. His partners will come to *me* when their invoices go unpaid. When I leave, I won’t be looking back—and I need to make sure no one comes looking for me, either.”

“I take it just quitting isn’t an option,” I say dryly.

A shadow crosses over Axel’s face. “Let’s just say that Ludo has me right where he wants me.”

“For now,” I add.

Slowly, Axel nods. “The process has been slow-going, but I’ve made progress. I have to be careful. Every move I make, I have to double- and triple-check. There’s no room for error. If I get caught, I’m dead.”

I know that’s true. To cross Ludo, you need vicious precision—even more so if you have to actively deceive him with your every move. Axel is playing a risky game here, but it’s my best shot at freedom.

“We can take him down faster together,” I say. “We’ve been working at this for ten years. We already have a plan in place.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I’m worried that this is another trap. That Ludo and Axel set up this elaborate, multiple-night scheme to trick me into giving Axel information. But would Ludo really go as far as burning down the Grille just to get me to let my guard down?

I need more answers.

Just as Axel is about to speak, I cut him off. “Why the Grille? Ludo has so many properties. Why are you targeting this one?”

“He hasn’t earned back his investment on the restaurant yet,” Axel says. “He’s barely owned it for a month. Gotta hit him where it hurts.”

Slowly, I nod. “How do I know I can trust you?”

Rolling his eyes, Axel leans back in his seat. “You’re the one who’s offering to help me, not the other way around.”

I sigh. Of course Axel can trust me. He knows he’s my only option out of this mess. But me trusting him? He already tried to frame us once.

“I suppose,” Axel says slowly, “that Florida should be proof enough.”

We sit in silence as I sort through my thoughts.

There’s no way that when we were in Florida, Ludo and Axel were working together to set this trap. Back then, Ludo tested us, and we passed with flying colors. We earned his trust, and he had no reason to suspect we’d betray him yet.

Is that enough? Is it worth the risk?

Is it worth not *taking the risk?* my mind counters.

If I don’t place my trust in Axel, we’re dead—there’s no other option. If I decide to join Axel, we at least have a chance of making it out of that mansion alive.

I have to try. I *have* to.

“All right,” I say, turning to face Axel. “I’m in—but we’re gonna need some help.”

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Chapter Nine

Wren

It’s almost two in the morning when Finn’s phone rings. He stares at it for a few seconds before answering.

“Hello?”

I turn back to the book in my hands. Neither of us can sleep, but we’re too tired to work, so I’ve been reading, and Finn has been typing away on his laptop.

“Where are you?” Finn’s gaze cuts to me as the color drains from his face.

“What?” I ask, but he turns away, ignoring me.

“How’d you get access to a phone?” he asks quietly.

My heart is in my throat as I watch Finn stiffly run a hand through his hair. *Could it be? No, there’s no way.*

“Axel?” Finn spits out. *“Axel?* Have you lost your mind? Elliot, there’s no way he’d help you. This is so obviously a trap.”

“Elliot?” I spring into action, lunging for the phone, but Finn knocks my hands away. “Let me talk to him!”

“He doesn’t have a lot of time,” Finn grits out. “Calm down.”

“Put it on speaker,” I hear Elliot say. “I want to talk to her.”

Thankfully, Finn does so without further protest.

“Love?”

“Ell.” My voice is wobbly, and I have to blink to get rid of my tears. This isn’t the time to cry. We need to stay focused. “Ell, are you okay? Are the others?”

“Yeah, we’re fine for now,” he says. “So are Benny and Andrew. I just don’t know how long that’ll last. Ludo’s made a couple threats, and I don’t want to stick around to see them come to fruition.”

“You think you’ve found a way out?” Finn asks. “With Axel’s help?”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I think we can trust him,” Elliot says. “I still want to be cautious until I’m sure, but like I said, I don’t know how much time we have.”

“Holloway’s right-hand man?” Finn’s frown deepens. “Sounds awfully convenient.”

“It’s the best option we have,” Elliot says.

“Or it’s a ploy to capture Wren,” Finn replies darkly.

Elliot sighs. “I don’t think this is a trap, but just in case, I need her to stay out of this.”

My stomach drops. “What? No!”

“I’ll keep her safe,” Finn says, completely ignoring me. “What do you need from us?”

“I’m running out of time,” Elliot says. “Axel has been taking me out to do jobs Ludo’s assigned to me. We’re heading out again tomorrow night. Finn, if you could meet us at that motel on Old Lincoln Highway just after midnight, we can work out a more detailed plan. I’d prefer it to be in person.”

I clench my fists. “I’m coming, too.”

“No,” they both say at the same time.

“But—”

“No,” Finn practically growls. “You showing up would be the stupidest thing you could do.”

“I’m sorry, love,” Elliot says, and he sounds so tired. So . . . disappointed. “If I was more sure that this isn’t a trap, it’d be a different story, but I can’t risk you getting hurt.”

“But you *don’t* think it’s a trap,” I counter, “or you wouldn’t be going along with it.”

“Yes,” he says hesitantly, “but I could be wrong. And given my recent track record, I think we should play it safe.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Of course, I’m not surprised. The guys will always prioritize my safety. I mean too much to them. But how can I *not* go? I have a chance to see him again, even if it’s only for a few minutes. Hopefully teaming up with Axel works, but what if it doesn’t?

Finn and Elliot work out a few more details. A second voice comes through the speaker, but I can’t make out any words.

“I have two minutes,” Elliot says. “Finn, can you give the phone to Wren?”

Silently, Finn takes it off speaker and hands it to me. I snatch the phone and hold it to my ear immediately.

“Ell?”

“Hey, love.” His voice is softer now, although I don’t miss the sadness. “I know you’re upset, and I’m sorry, but we have to be careful. There’s no point in endangering you.”

Even as disappointment settles over me, heavy and dark, warmth spreads through my chest. I was so scared I'd never get to hear his voice again.

"I love you," he tells me. "And god, Wren, I miss you so much. I wish I could see you—I promise, I do. But I need to know you're safe."

My heart is breaking, but I smile. Even now, when *he's* the one who could be killed at any moment, he's thinking of me. At this point, I shouldn't expect anything else. It's how he's always been.

"I love you, too," I whisper, barely able to keep my voice from breaking. I want to tell him about what I found—about how it might help—but I don't want to mess things up more than I already have.

"Are you doing okay?" he asks. "Are you eating?"

My laugh is hollow. "I think my eating habits should be the least of your worries right now."

"I need to know you're all right," he says, his voice quiet. Strained.

Right. If I can put him at ease even a little, of course I will. "I'm eating," I lie. "Promise."

Thankfully, it seems that Finn left the room to give us some privacy, so he's not here to give me one of his pointed glares. I think he'll understand, though, if he overhears. While my appetite is all but gone, that's not something either of us want Ell worrying about right now.

"Good," Elliot says on a relieved sigh. "And you're staying safe?"

"Mmhmm. Finn took me to his—"

"Don't," he blurts. "Love, don't. Axel can hear everything you say."

"Right," I mumble. "I forgot."

"It's okay," Elliot says gently. "Just as long as you're safe."

"I am. I've barely left the place we're hiding. We both figure me going out isn't worth the risk, plus we've been trying to find a way to save you

guys.” I pause, and the ache in my chest intensifies. “I wish you were here.”

“I wish I was, too,” he says.

“You think joining forces with Axel will work? What does he want, exactly?”

“He wants out of the business,” Elliot replies. “And he doesn’t want anyone coming after him when he leaves, especially Holloway. I know trusting him seems like the last thing we should do, but I’m pretty sure he’s telling the truth. We were just at the Garden Grille—you’ll probably hear about it tomorrow.”

“Hear about what, exactly?”

“The place burning down. Axel is slowly trying to strip Ludo of his power and wealth. This is one step of many, as was revealing Aubrey’s location to Huxley when they were in Florida.”

“What?” I screech. “She could’ve died!”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Elliot says. “But that’s why I need you to stay out of this. I know you don’t want to, love, but I can’t watch him hurt you. Please.”

I bite my tongue. How am I supposed to let this chance slip through my fingers? Even if it’s a trap, at least I’ll get to see him again. The same can’t be said otherwise. We’ve gone up against Ludo before and failed.

“Wren.” Elliot sounds desperate and so, so tired.

“I just want to hold you,” I tell him softly. “I’m scared I won’t get another chance to.”

“I know,” he says, and I realize he’s holding back tears. “I want that, too. But I need you *alive* more.”

My eyes slide closed as I do my best not to shut down. There’s too much pain in my heart to speak.

“I have to go,” Elliot says. “Wren—god, Wren, I love you. Please promise me you won’t come. Please.”

“I love you, too,” I whisper.

“Wren, *please*—Axel, no, wait—”

After that, the line goes dead. I stare at the screen as guilt fills my lungs, making it hard to breathe. There aren’t words to describe how much I need to see Ell, but he sounded so worried. I just didn’t want to lie to him twice in one conversation.

Finn comes back into the room and takes the phone from me. “You’re not coming with me.”

“I have to go! I need to see him.”

He shakes his head. “It’s a trap, Wren. *I* will go, just in case, because Holloway wants *you*, not me.”

“But—”

“I know you want to see him,” Finn tells me gently. “But Axel thought you and the guys were Ludo’s rat, remember? He almost uncovered that you broke into the safe. Why’d he help you now? It’s a *trick.* They’re holding something over Elliot—something that has him so scared that he’s willing to lure me out, probably so they can follow me home to you.”

“No. No, he’d never do that.”

“Think of how much pressure he’s under! We can’t be sure, and my main priority here is keeping you safe. You’re staying here.”

Without another word, I snatch up my book and storm upstairs. Only once I’m locked in my room do I let my tears run down my face. With my back to the door, I sink to the floor.

Don’t, I tell myself. *Don’t listen to him.*

My hands curl into fists. I take a few deep, determined breaths until the ache in my chest has eased enough that I can think clearly.

I’m going to this damn meeting, and *no one* can stop me.

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Chapter Ten

Oliver

We're all going to die. We're all going to die. We're all going to die.

My hands are trembling as I sit in my dark room. I abandoned the mattress a couple minutes ago, hoping that the hardness of the wood floor would ground me some.

It hasn't worked.

Wrapping my arms around my legs, I rest my chin on my knees and slowly rock myself back and forth. I'm not sure how long it's been since Elliot left. Hours, maybe? At this point, I'm worried he's not coming back.

I do my best to take a deep breath. *Calm yourself down. You can do it.*

But my heart continues to race, and my thoughts only take a darker turn. What if Ludo has already killed Elliot? What if he's dead?

No. *No.* Ludo said he needed him alive and in "perfect condition" for something. But what if that's done? Or what if Elliot failed?

My breaths come in short, tearful gasps as my mind conjures an image of Elliot, bloody and still, his eyes open yet lifeless.

And what about Rhett? I saw him again this evening while he played catch in the yard with Benny. Rhett doesn't always look up at me—he has to be careful not to draw Benny's attention—but he managed to tonight. The little bit of hope that's usually in his expression was gone.

Does that mean there's no chance of us getting out of here? Out of the three of us, I'm the least likely to be able to come up with an escape plan. Both Rhett and Ell have some semblance of freedom, although I'm sure it doesn't feel like it to them.

As for me, I'm stuck—until Ludo comes for me, that is. His threat hasn't left my mind since those words drifted through the walls.

What's he going to do to me?

It feels like I sit on the ground for hours until footsteps sound in the hallway. At first, I'm worried it's Ludo, but then they pass my room, and the door next to mine opens and closes.

Ell.

With a suppressed sob of relief, I crawl to the wall in between us and tap on it gently.

There's no reply.

My heart sinks. Was that not him? Is someone else in his room? What's going on?

I tap again, and this time, it's answered, but not on the other side of the wall. It comes from my window.

Springing to my feet, I tiptoe to the window and open it carefully. Elliot looks tired, but he's alive and seems to be unharmed.

"Ol," he whispers when he sees my face. He climbs into my room carefully, entering my open arms the second his feet hit the floor.

This time, I’m not as worried. No one comes into our rooms at night except for when Axel has come to get Elliot. Since that’s already happened, no one will come in—as long as we stay quiet.

“I found a way out,” he whispers as his arms lock around my waist. “I’m not sure when, but it’ll be as quickly as we can manage.”

“How?” I whisper back, clutching his arms and peering at him through the darkness.

“Axel,” Elliot says. “He’s not who we thought he was. At least, I’m pretty sure. He’s our best option, and it’s better than ending up dead.”

“You’re positive?”

“As much as I can be.” Framing my face in his hands, Elliot leans his forehead against mine. “I can’t handle hearing you crying during the day and not being able to do anything to help you. I have to try, Oliver.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“No,” he says softly. “No, don’t apologize. This isn’t your fault—not in the slightest.”

He fits his mouth to mine then, I think in an attempt of reassurance or comfort. It only makes me feel worse.

“I don’t want you to endanger yourself because of me,” I murmur. “What if something happens to you?”

“If I don’t do something, we’ll all end up dead,” he replies quietly.

“I know, but—”

“I’m being careful,” he whispers. “Axel got me in contact with Finn and Wren, so we’ll have help from the outside.”

The tension in my muscles eases. “You talked to Wren? How is she?”

“All right. We’re meeting with Finn tomorrow, and I had a lot of trouble convincing her to stay behind. Not sure I managed, honestly.”

“You don’t want to see her?”

“I don’t want her to get hurt.” Elliot runs a hand over my hair, unable to stop touching me. “It killed me to tell her to stay away, but I had to. I don’t want her locked up like this—or worse.”

I nod in agreement. “Did she ask about me?”

“She did.” He caresses my face, and I lean into his touch, my hands resting on his hips. “I told her you’re okay.”

“Tell me more about your plan with Axel.”

Elliot shakes his head. “We shouldn’t talk that much. Besides, you need to sleep.” Gently, he leads me over to my mattress.

Since he held me while I fell asleep a few days ago, I’ve craved it every night. His warmth, his soothing touches, *him.* So this time, I don’t protest as we situate ourselves on the mattress. Elliot’s arms come around me, my back to his chest, and I focus on the feeling of his skin against mine.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs in my ear.

“You won’t fall asleep?” I ask.

“I won’t.”

His body is more relaxed than it was last time—probably because he’s found a way to save us. I melt into him and stroke my thumb up and down his arm. As he holds me, my anxiety fades, at least for the moment. And for the first night since the last time he was in here, I sleep peacefully.

. . .

In the morning, I’m woken by the sound of my bedroom door opening. Something heavy and warm is draped over my body, and I’m sweatier than I normally am.

“Hey,” the guard shouts. “They’re both in here.”

Elliot jerks upright, and he immediately shoves me behind him.

He fell asleep, I realize, before a second, much more terrifying thought hits me.

We're dead.

"How'd you get in here?" one of the men shouts.

"The window, obviously," another one snaps.

Despite Elliot trying to shield me, the men grab us both and drag us apart.

"What should we do?" the third man asks. "Punish them somehow?"

"I think that's up to the boss."

"No," Elliot blurts. "Oliver didn't do anything wrong. It was me—just me. Leave him alone."

They ignore his pleas and shove us into the hallway. Elliot looks over his shoulder, his gaze clashing with mine in an apologetic stare.

"I'm sorry," he says, right before one of the guards hits him over the head.

"Shut up and walk," he snaps.

They take us to Ludo's office. The layout of the mansion is burned into my brain from when I studied the blueprints with Wren, so I know the way even though the men don't tell us where we're headed.

Halfway there, we hear yelling.

"How the hell did this happen?" It's Ludo's voice. "No, I want answers! Why didn't the fire system go off? Why were the fryers still on?"

What the hell is he talking about?

"Who was the closing manager last night?" Ludo barks. "Get them on the phone. And get me the security footage!"

"It was all destroyed in the fire," a familiar voice says—Axel.

"Goddammit," Ludo shouts.

"I'll find out who closed last night," Axel tells him.

By now, we're right outside the office. The door is closed, and after one of the guards knocks, Ludo shouts, "Not now!"

"Uh—sorry, sir, but I don't think you'll want this to wait."

The door opens, revealing a tired-looking Axel. For a split second, worry flickers over his face, but it's gone before it fully registers. "What?" he asks harshly.

"We found them together," one of the men holding Elliot says. "This one snuck in through the other's window and spent the night with him."

Ludo shoves Axel out of the way. His glare makes me flinch. "I never thought you were a fool, Hayes," he says, swiveling to look Elliot in the eye. "I was wrong."

"Punish me," Elliot says desperately. "I shouldn't've done it, I know. So punish me, but leave Oliver out of this."

Ludo laughs, and a chill settles over me at the genuine amusement in it. "Your begging won't do any good. Besides, I've left Oliver alone for long enough. It's time."

"No!" Elliot lunges for him, but the guards stop him before he reaches Ludo. It takes two of them to hold him back, but when Ludo speaks, Elliot freezes.

"You'll only make it worse on him if you put up a fight."

My chest tightens with dread. Is this it? Is he going to kill me?

"Take them to the basement," Ludo says.

Neither of us protest as they drag us downstairs. Elliot's face is stricken with fear and regret, and my mind feels almost numb as we descend a second set of stairs into the basement.

The ceiling is low down here, and it's dark except for the occasional lightbulb. One of the guards opens a door that's covered in thick foam

padding, and then we're shoved inside.

Inside, the room smells damp and mildewy. There's a metal chair in the center, right next to a drain in the floor, and a hose hangs on the far wall.

I'm more than familiar with the rumors surrounding Ludo—specifically the ones that earned him the nickname Redback. He's a fan of torture—slow, painful torture that ultimately leads to the death of his victims. He takes pleasure in drawing out the process, much like the spider of the same name.

Gulping, I look to Elliot. His face is slack, his chest rising and falling quickly.

I'm sorry, he mouths.

When Ludo steps into the room, I swear the temperature drops. He's carrying something long and thin with two prongs at one end. I recognize it almost immediately—a cattle prod.

"Please let me take his place," Elliot says weakly, but Ludo ignores him.

The guards yank all my clothes off before shoving me into the chair. Between all of them, they hold me so tightly I can barely even struggle. Only once they've cuffed my wrists and ankles to the chair do they back off.

My vision blurs, and with every passing second, it's getting more difficult to breathe. *I'm never going to see Wren and Rhett again.*

"I really thought you'd learned your lesson," Ludo says to Elliot. "But here you are, so quick to underestimate me again."

I yelp as Ludo shocks me in the thigh.

"It's insulting, really."

He shocks me again, holding the prod to my skin for longer this time. As the pain builds, I try my hardest not to scream.

“It seems you’ve forgotten who you’re dealing with.”

This time, when Ludo shocks me, a pathetic cry forces itself past my lips. I barely register Elliot wincing in the corner of my eye.

Don’t look at him. It’ll only make it worse.

As I try to catch my breath, I realize that Ludo is still talking.

“. . . and you’d do well to remember that. But I have to make sure you do, since clearly you’re incapable of doing it yourself.”

My scream echoes around the small room as Ludo presses the cattle prod into the same spot. When he lets up, I gasp for air, and almost on instinct, my watering eyes turn toward Elliot. He’s fallen to his knees, two men holding him even though he’s not moving. Tears are streaming down his cheeks, and his fists are clenched at his sides.

I’m sorry, he mouths again.

Finally, Ludo turns toward me, and his smile makes my stomach tighten with dread. He raises the prod.

“I’ll enjoy making an example of you.”

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Chapter Eleven

Rhett

Where are they?

This morning, Benny and I are working on a simple jab-cross-hook combination. I taught it to him a couple days ago, but we had to go easy because we didn't have the proper equipment. His form is much better than when we started, enough that I suspect he's been practicing on his own.

I should be more proud, but I'm having trouble focusing. Oliver and Elliot always watch us from their windows. But this morning, their rooms seem empty—at least, as much as I can see into them, since they're on the second floor.

Worry tinges my thoughts enough that I miss what Benny says to me. He has to shove me in the shoulder to get my attention again.

"Hey! I was talking to you."

I shake my head, fighting the need to glance up at the windows again. "Sorry. What?"

"I said that soon, your bodyguards will see me as a threat." Benny puts his fists up.

Ludo was happy to supply us with a pair of kids' boxing gloves, as well as some training pads. I'm sure he views this as entirely harmless. At this level, it is. I'm probably fooling myself into thinking it could actually help Benny in the event that things go wrong here.

Still, I have to try.

Plastering on a smile, I say, "Considering they know who you are, I doubt that."

We're about to start up again when Axel steps out of the mansion. His lips are pressed into a thin line, and his shoulders are stiff as he walks toward us.

"Benny," he says, barely maintaining a calm tone, "head inside. Mia is waiting for you."

"Five more minutes? Please, Mr. Axel?"

"No." Pulling a colorful package out of his pants pocket, Axel gives Benny an apologetic glance. "Maybe we can give you extra time tonight."

Benny's disappointment fades as he snatches up the bag of sour gummies. With a grin, he throws his arms around Axel. "You're the best! Thank you."

A startled expression settles over Axel's face, and he clumsily pats Benny on the back. "S-sure."

After he waves bye to me, Benny sprints into the house. The men who always escort me back to my room once we're done step forward, but Axel waves them off.

"I'll take him up. I need you two on trash duty."

One of them groans. "Come on, again? We just did it the other day."

"Now," Axel snaps. I've seen him get firm with some of the men under his command, but this is another level. Now that Benny is gone, his mask is slipping.

The two men jump into action, scurrying away quickly. It makes me wonder what Ludo and Axel have done to instill such a level of fear into their men.

Once we're alone, Axel grabs my arms and pulls me into the house. I've been perfectly compliant, so it doesn't make sense, but I'm not about to piss him off more.

"We need to talk," he whispers when we're in the empty hallway on the second floor.

"I already told you and Ludo, Aubrey sold the hard drive. We don't know where it is."

After shoving me into my room, Axel shuts the door behind us. "That's not what I'm talking about. Last night, I spoke to Elliot."

"Where is he?" I ask. "He and Oliver always watch me and Benny from their windows, but they weren't there this morning."

Axel's face grows even paler than it already is, but he shakes his head. "I . . . I don't know, nor is that the point of this conversation. I'm helping you three get out of here—as long as you help *me.*"

I laugh. "Are you forgetting that mere weeks ago, you were trying to convince Ludo that we were the rat he was searching for?"

"Well, I didn't know I could trust you back then," Axel bites out.

That gets me to stop. "What?"

"I'm the rat," he hisses out quietly. "I need to get as far away from Ludo as possible. Elliot says you have a plan to take him down and kill him."

My heart sinks. If Elliot told them that, then they must've hurt him badly—or done the same to Oliver. "Where is he?" I ask again. "What have you done to them?"

“I haven’t done anything,” Axel says. “But let’s just say that we’re running out of time. If we’re going to get you to safety, we have to act fast.”

“Why did he tell you that? What did you do to him to get him to talk?”

“I *told* you,” Axel hisses. “I’m *helping* you. Elliot and I are working to get you all out of here.”

There’s no fucking way. I stare at Axel, trying to figure him out. Ludo already has us right where he wants us, so what’s he trying to pull?”

“Do you want to end up dead?” Axel snaps impatiently.

“No.”

“Then trust me. I’m your best option. Fuck, I’m your *only* option.”

I swallow. That, unfortunately, is true. “The boys need to come with us, too. Andrew and Benny.”

“I know. Elliot and I already discussed it.”

“And what exactly do you want out of this?” I ask as I narrow my eyes.

“My freedom,” Axel replies, and desperation bleeds into his voice. “I need out. I need Ludo dead, and I need no one to come looking for me when I’m gone.”

I’m not sure if I should believe him, but I’m also not sure I have much of a choice. I can’t do anything but follow along with whatever I’m forced to do.

“What do you need from me?”

“Nothing yet,” Axel says. “We’re not sure how we’re getting you out of here, just that we’re making a plan. I just wanted you to be aware.”

I watch him silently. Everything in me is screaming that I shouldn’t trust him, but what if he’s telling the truth? We have to try *something.*

“I understand you have no reason to believe me.” He moves toward the door. If he stays in here for too long, it’ll look suspicious. “Time will prove

my intentions. For now, just stay ready."

When he leaves, I lower myself onto the bed and place my head in my hands. I've resigned myself to the fact that we're going to die. Of course I've been trying to find a way out, but I haven't been able to.

But now? This could change everything.

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Chapter Twelve

Wren

“I’m coming with you.”

Finn sighs when he realizes I’m not going to let him past me without a fight. I’m leaning against the front door, arms crossed, with my shoes already on.

“You can’t,” he tells me.

“Yes, I can,” I say confidently.

“No,” Finn snaps. “I’m not letting you get hurt again. You got kidnapped under my watch once, Wren, and I’ll be damned if I let it happen again.”

“But—”

“No.”

“What if this is the last time I’ll ever get to see him? What if we can’t get them out in time, and Ludo kills them all? What if things go wrong again? *Please,* Finn. Please don’t take this away from me.”

Pain flickers across his expression, and I wonder if he’s thinking of *her*—the woman he didn’t get a last moment with. He must be, because he sighs again, but this time he nods.

“Fine. But you do *exactly* what I tell you to, you understand me? If I think you’re in danger, I’m getting you the hell out of there.”

“Got it.” I open the door and step outside.

It’s dark, and this far from the city, we have a decent view of the stars. Never in my life have I seen so many of them in the sky at once. It’s breathtaking.

In Finn’s car, Nine Inch Nails plays from the radio as he speeds down the road. It feels weird to leave the farmhouse for the first time in almost two weeks, but my heart is light with hope. I finally get to see Elliot.

Maybe I should be more worried, but I’m not. I trust Elliot’s judgment. He’s doubting himself because he thinks it’s his fault that they were captured. I understand where he’s coming from, but it’s not like he lost his ability to think logically or something. He’s always been so careful when it comes to our safety—that will never change.

It takes forever to reach the motel. The parking lot is basically empty except for a dark SUV parked near the room we’re supposed to be meeting in. Once Finn has parked, we sit in silence for a minute. He scans the parking lot, probably waiting for someone to jump out of the shadows and take me, but nothing happens.

“Stay here,” he says without glancing at me. “I don’t want you getting out of the car without cover.”

I nod. I’m already stressing him out enough. The least I can do is listen to what he says.

Finn gets out and rounds the vehicle. His gaze constantly moves over the motel and the lot, but still, there’s nothing. So far, it seems like this really isn’t a trap.

When Finn opens my door, I slip out quickly. My heart is beating faster than it ever has, and I have to consciously remind myself not to bolt for the motel room. We still don't know what exactly is waiting for us inside.

Finn places a protective hand on my back, looking around the property one more time before we move toward the building. At some point, he pulled out his car keys, and he places them in my palm.

"Stay out of sight," he whispers as we approach the room. The curtain is drawn, so we can't see inside. "And get the hell out of here at the first sign of danger."

With my heart in my throat, I step out of view. Finn slowly turns the knob and opens the door, gun in hand. In the next second, he's aiming his weapon and peering into the room.

I desperately want to lean in so I can see, but I watch Finn's face instead. It's hardened with concentration, but as he takes in the room, it softens to one of worry.

"You look awful, Elliot."

When Finn lowers his weapon and steps back to make room for me, I can't wait any longer. I bolt inside. Elliot is just getting up from where he was sitting on the nearest bed, and Axel is on the other, perfectly relaxed.

I barely get a good look at Elliot before I jump into his arms. His eyes are bloodshot, and his posture is drooped, like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Wren." He's shaking his head even as he holds me tightly. "What're you doing here?"

"I had to see you. Please don't tell me to leave."

"No," he mutters, and he smiles even as his eyes turn glossy. "No, I'm glad you're here."

“How long do we have?” Finn asks.

Axel glances at his watch. “An hour tops, but the less time we take, the better.”

Finn nods, stepping up to Elliot. He checked the bathroom while we were hugging, and now he pulls Elliot into an embrace. “It’s good to see you alive.”

Squeezing Finn, Elliot manages a quiet, “Thanks.”

The moment they pull away from each other, Elliot turns to me. I gasp at the dark red stain on his shirt. How didn’t I notice it before?

“You’re hurt?” I ask, reaching out to him.

“What?” He follows my gaze and glances down at himself. “Oh—no. That’s from a job. Fuck.”

I step back as Elliot pulls off his shirt. Grabbing my hand, he pulls me toward the bathroom, where he starts rinsing the blood out with cold water.

“Tell me what you found on the drive, love,” Elliot says.

“Wait.” Finn casts a suspicious glance toward Axel. “You’re sure we can trust him?”

Sighing, Elliot squeezes out the shirt and then places it under the running water again. “If this was a trap, don’t you think something would’ve happened by now?”

“I suppose,” Finn replies as he moves toward the front door. He’s holstered his weapon, but his hand is still resting on it.

After wringing out his shirt again, Elliot moves to put it back on. But he seems to realize that it’s wet, as if he wasn’t the one who just had it under the water. With another sigh, he drapes it across one of the beds before lowering himself onto it. He pulls me directly into his lap and buries his face in my hair, inhaling deeply.

“Tell me,” he says quietly.

“There were records of payments to two men Ludo is in business with,” I explain. “Raymond King and Fredrick Burbank. But the numbers don’t add up. King and Burbank supply the product, and Ludo distributes, and there’s supposed to be a three-way split of the money.”

Axel leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands clasped together. He watches me intently, like he thinks I know something he doesn’t.

“Go on,” Elliot says. His hand is warm on my back as he strokes it up and down my spine.

“Ludo isn’t splitting the money evenly,” I say, watching as Axel’s eyebrows shoot up. “He’s under-reporting the amount he’s making from his buyers and keeping more than he agreed to.”

“And it isn’t just with King and Burbank,” Finn adds. “I re-checked some of his other records and found a few more discrepancies.”

“I knew it,” Axel mutters under his breath.

Elliot looks up. “You weren’t aware of what Holloway was doing?”

“No. I never knew the exact numbers in relation to his dealings with King and Burbank, but that alone made me suspicious. Usually, I help Ludo with his books, but he’s always refused to let me anywhere near certain deals. This is one of them. He doesn’t even want me at their monthly meetings.”

“Makes sense,” Elliot says. “Ludo is a secretive man. Doesn’t want information getting into the wrong hands and all that.”

Axel rattles off a list of names, his eyes trained on Finn. “Are those the other deals that aren’t adding up?”

“They are,” Finn says. He’s watching Axel carefully, and I can practically see the gears turning in his brain. My guess is that he’s trying to figure out

whether Axel is telling the truth about not being involved with these deals.

As far as I'm concerned, this is definitely not a trap. We've been sitting here for long enough, and Axel hasn't made a move to take out Finn, nor has another team shown up.

Elliot was right—just as I knew he would be.

"When's Ludo's next meeting with King and Burbank?" Finn asks.

Axel glances at his phone. "In a few days. Three, exactly."

"Is there any way you could convince him to move the meeting up?" Elliot asks.

"No," Axel replies, a frown sliding over his features. "I've never done that before, and he's too on edge because of the Grille. It would probably make him suspicious."

The Grille. That's right—Elliot told me they burned it down, and I saw it in the news today.

"You think waiting three days will be a problem?" Finn asks Elliot. "What's going on?"

Elliot's gaze falls to the floor, and his arm tightens around my waist. "Oliver . . . he . . ."

My stomach tightens with dread at the pain in his voice. "What happened?"

When Elliot looks at me, my heart stops. His eyes are brimming with tears, and his features hold more guilt and worry than I've ever seen on him. "It was my fault," he whispers.

"W-what was your fault?"

"We weren't supposed to see each other." As Elliot scrunches his eyes shut, tears fall onto his cheeks. "Our rooms are right next to each other, and

I was able to sneak over. But I got caught, and . . . Ludo punished him instead of me." Elliot drops his head as he stifles a sob.

Silence fills the room, and Axel shifts uncomfortably. He's watching Elliot with a guilty expression on his face.

"Ell," I whisper. "Is he . . ."

But I can't go on. I'm too worried that if I ask, I'll be speaking it into existence—speaking Oliver *out* of existence.

"Is he alive?" Finn asks for me. He's gone pale, and his whole body is stiff.

He's bracing himself, I realize.

"Yes," Elliot says. "Yes, I'm sorry, I should've led with that. He's alive, and he's okay, but I can't watch him go through that again. He was in so much pain."

At the same time my body sags with relief, my chest aches for Oliver. This is what I was afraid of. We *have* to get them out of there.

"Elliot," I murmur as I wrap him up in my arms.

His head hits my chest, and this time, he doesn't hold back his sob. My own tears well up in my eyes as I imagine what Oliver and Elliot had to go through.

When will all the suffering end?

"I'm sorry," Axel says quietly. "I can do my best to keep Ludo busy for the next couple days. Thankfully, he has a mess to deal with since we burned down the Grille. He'll have less free time than usual."

"Thank you," I reply when Elliot tries to speak but can't.

He's able to calm himself down within a minute or two. I wish I could tell him to let go and cry for as long as he needs, but we have to keep this

meeting as short as possible. All I can do is hold him and let him cling to me.

“We can use this meeting to our advantage,” Finn says. He seems to be a little bit more willing to admit that this doesn’t seem to be a trap. “Axel, how much authority do you have over Holloway’s men?”

“Plenty,” Axel replies. “They take almost all their orders from me.”

“And how much do his men respect you?”

“Enough. They’ll obey me, and I think that’s what matters here.”

Finn nods. “So when Ludo is at the meeting, you can tell his men to do whatever—even say it’s a direct order from Holloway himself—and they’ll do it.”

“Correct.”

“What’re you thinking?” Elliot asks.

“The day of the meeting, we send King and Burbank proof that Holloway has been under-reporting their income. They’ll want their fair share, and odds are, they won’t let Ludo out of their sight until they have it. He’s a slimy bastard, and he’s already fooled them once.

“While Ludo is gone, Axel can order his men to get the guys together—Andrew and Benny, too. Just say there’s been a change of plans and that Ludo decided to move them.”

Slowly, Axel nods. “That’s simple enough. They know better than to question me, and if they do, I can tell them that this is need-to-know. It’s nothing I haven’t done before.”

“And what about Holloway?” Elliot asks. “Are we leaving King and Burbank to deal with him, or are we finding some way to capture him?”

Finn frowns. “Do you think Rhett will be okay if he’s not the one who gets to kill Holloway?”

Elliot and I exchange a glance, and my chest squeezes. Rhett's apology from weeks ago echoes through my mind. He deserves to be the one to finally end Ludo's life, but he wouldn't sacrifice us for that chance.

I would *ruin everything we've worked for,* he told me. *For you, for Ell, for O. And I'm sorry I couldn't admit it to you.*

"We're his priority," Elliot says. "All he cares about right now is us getting out safely."

"We might still be able to do both," Axel cuts in. He pauses for a moment, frowning, before his eyes light up. "We can use Holloway's systems against him."

"Go on," Elliot says.

"Most of Ludo's liquid cash is stored in offshore accounts, far out of reach of the government. But we've all witnessed how paranoid he is. He has multiple stashes all around the city in a variety of storage units. As far as I'm aware, I'm the only one who knows about them, other than Ludo himself. He only told me so I could help keep an eye on them, and it took him a while to be able to put that much trust in me.

"If King and Burbank demand Ludo gives them their payments immediately, which is what I'd do, Ludo won't go for money in his accounts. He'll go for what's untraceable and easily accessible."

"The money he has stashed," Elliot says.

Axel nods. "Exactly."

"How many storage units are there?" I ask.

"Six."

"But we can't keep an eye on that many at once," I say. "There aren't enough of us."

Axel shakes his head. “We’ll only have to watch one. Before the meeting, the two of you can empty them out. I won’t be able to find an excuse to get away for long enough to do it myself.”

“Why not?” Finn asks suspiciously.

“Ludo keeps me busy,” Axel replies. “And I’ll need to keep *him* busy so he doesn’t have a chance to hurt Oliver more.”

“Right,” Finn mutters.

“I know you don’t have any reason to trust me, but I want this as much as you do,” Axel says. “I have no desire to live the rest of my life under Ludo Holloway’s thumb.”

Finn doesn’t respond. His hand is still resting on his gun, and he doesn’t look any more relaxed than he did when we first entered the room.

At least he’s willing to go along with this.

“What do we do with King and Burbank?” Elliot asks.

Axel shrugs. “Kill them and leave their bodies behind.”

“But this doesn’t get you what you want,” Elliot says. “If Ludo is gone, sure, people will look for him, but they’ll also still look for you.”

“Not if we send out Ludo’s books to the rest of the people he’s cheating,” Axel says. “Doing that would ruin him completely.”

“You don’t think you’ll catch any blow back?” Elliot’s tone is doubtful, his brows furrowed.

“Not if I’m the one who sends out the documents,” Axel replies. “I can start with the ones that need to go to King and Burbank.”

“Absolutely not,” Finn says. “I’ll do it.”

Axel rolls his eyes. “Just send me copies. I’m perfectly capable.”

“No. I’ll send them from your email myself.”

“What? No! That’s stupid.”

“You can either give me the login information, or I’ll hack into your account myself.” Finn shrugs and crosses his arms. “The choice is yours.”

Axel looks to me and Elliot for help, but we both shrug.

“You’re not doing it,” Finn says. “It’s too important. Sure, you want out, whatever. *I* want to make sure my friends stay alive, and there’s no way I’m trusting a stranger with such an integral part of this plan.”

“Fine,” Axel grits out.

“So we empty out the storage containers,” I say, not wanting to get too off topic. “And then what?”

“We wait at one of them until they show up. There’s one in particular that’s part of a smaller facility—less likely for other people to be around. I’d say that one is our best shot.”

“And we kill King and Burbank, take Ludo hostage, and then send out the rest of his books to his other allies,” Finn says—as if it’s that simple.

“Effectively ruining his reputation,” Axel adds. “And I’ll look like the good guy for letting everyone know.”

Everyone is silent as we mull over the plan. My arms tighten around Elliot as I realize we’re almost done. Axel said we have an hour, and it hasn’t been nearly that long, but he said the sooner we finish, the better.

No. I’m not ready to say goodbye yet.

“What do you think?” Finn asks Elliot.

“I think it could work.”

“We’ll need the addresses of the storage facilities, along with the unit numbers,” Finn says. “Plus your email login information and a general timeline.”

There’s a notepad on the small desk in the corner, and Axel starts scribbling away on it.

“Love,” Elliot whispers. He’s watching me with a pained expression.

A dozen pleas fill my mind, but I bite my tongue before I voice them. He can’t stay here, nor can he come back with us. There’s no other way to get everyone else out.

But how am I supposed to say goodbye?

Axel hands Finn the piece of paper before turning to us. His hardened features soften at the tears in my eyes. Just as I’m expecting him to tell Elliot they have to go, he sighs. “You have twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes. Considering I didn’t think we had any time left, that feels like an eternity.

With a wary glance, Finn steps outside with Axel. I’m glad he’s still being careful. Without him, I don’t think Elliot would be able to fully let his guard down.

When the door closes behind them, I frame Elliot’s face with my hands. He closes his eyes, but not before I see the tears he’s trying to hold back.

“I’ve missed you,” he croaks out softly, “*so much*, love.”

“I know,” I whisper. My lips brush against his, a feather-light touch, and he grabs my head and deepens the kiss.

“Wren,” Elliot groans. His tongue slips into my mouth, dancing with mine. His movements are far past desperate. They’re slow, almost mournful, like every touch is part of a drawn-out goodbye.

I suppose, in a way, that’s exactly what this is.

My heart breaks for Elliot as he lifts me up and re-positions me so I’m straddling him. I can’t even imagine what he’s gone through—being separated from everyone, being forced to do Ludo’s bidding, watching as Holloway tortures Oliver—but I know it’s been awful. If I can offer him any amount of solace, even if it’s small and brief, I *need* to.

“I love you,” I whisper.

He pulls away and stares at me, his gaze unwavering. Piercing. “Wren, I love you with everything in me, and I’m going to fight my hardest to get us all back to you. I—I’m sorry this is what we’ve come to. I’m sorry we couldn’t—”

Before he can go on, I capture the rest of his apology in a long kiss. I don’t want him thinking about that right now.

Taking Elliot’s wrists, I guide his hands underneath my shirt. He moans, his fingers splaying across my body and grabbing my waist. The simple touch floods me with desire, sending a shiver up my spine.

Elliot is watching me with hooded eyes. His lips are slightly parted, and at least for the moment, it seems like I’ve successfully diverted his attention.

“May I?” he whispers, his fingers curling around the hem of my shirt.

With a silent nod, I raise my arms so he can pull it off easier. Goosebumps form over my skin as the cool air hits me. I reach behind me, unclasping my bra and pulling it off, before I toss it onto the floor where Elliot dropped my shirt and jacket.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs.

My breath hitches when he cups my breasts in his hands and squeezes. With a moan, I press my lips to his and caress his face. Having his hands on me again feels so *good*.

Without warning, Elliot grabs me and stands. He holds me to him as he walks over to the desk and sets me on it. “Tell me this is okay.” His voice is rough—strained. “Love, please. I need . . . I need you.”

“Yes.” I kiss him gently, tilting my head as one of my arms slips around the back of his neck.

Elliot’s hands are trembling as he undoes my pants. It makes my heart skip a beat. I think I can probably count on one hand the amount of times I’ve seen Elliot’s hands shake—if I ever have.

“Up,” he says softly.

I brace my hands on the desk and lift my hips so he can slide my pants down my legs. My panties come with them, and I kick off my shoes so he can pull everything off.

Stepping back, Elliot takes me in. His gaze is warm against my skin, and I spread my legs and lean back on the desk to give him a better view. He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and a sudden need to place my lips against his hot skin fills me.

“Come here,” I say.

He moves closer, his fingers skimming my thighs. Stretching upward, I brush my lips across his neck. Having him close brings me a type of comfort I’ve craved for weeks, and I want to wrap my arms around him and never let go.

Elliot’s thumb massages my clit gently while his free hand cups the back of my head. I stare into his eyes, still bloodshot and filled to the brim with regret.

I wish I could take away all his pain. Sure, I’ve been lonely and terrified for the guys, but it’s nothing compared to what they’re going through.

“Love.” Elliot dips his head down until his lips meet mine. He circles my clit while he kisses me with a fervor so intense I lose my breath.

When he slips a finger into me, we both groan. I find my hands reaching for him almost automatically. It only takes me a couple seconds to undo his pants and push them and his briefs down his thighs.

His dick is already hard, and I stroke it slowly as he fingers me. He kisses me again, moaning against my mouth as he slides a second finger into me. My tongue enters his mouth and tangles with his, and I feel myself clamping around his fingers as he thrusts them into me.

“Ell,” I gasp.

“I’ve thought about doing this to you every night,” he murmurs. “So many things.”

I moan. “What else?”

“Kissing you.” He groans when I stroke him faster. “Finally putting that hook in your bedroom to good use. Two of us fucking you together. I thought . . . I thought about everything. God—god, Wren, stop.”

My hand stills, and I realize he’s panting.

“I don’t want to come yet.” He pulls my hand away from his cock, and I note the sadness returning to his voice. “Not . . . not yet.”

“We’ll do all those things,” I say, hoping to give him a few more minutes of comfort before we have to face reality again.

“All of them,” he echoes quietly, his fingers still moving inside me.

“And more,” I tell him. “Once we’re together again.”

He nods and rests his forehead against mine. I kiss him, letting the sadness fade again so I can focus on him. We fall deeper into each other, both of us doing our best to forget the harsh reality that lies outside this motel room.

“Wren,” he murmurs, curling his fingers and hitting my g-spot perfectly.

“I need you inside of me,” I breathe out, guiding him into me.

Elliot groans. As he pushes in deeper, I grab onto his arms, relishing in the feeling of having him close again. I’ve missed this—missed everything about him.

The past week and a half, I haven't had many sexual desires, but when my body needed release, I couldn't get myself there. Every time I tried to make myself come, I'd inevitably think of the guys, and then I'd start crying.

Now, with Elliot thrusting into me, the sensations are all my mind can process. He keeps his thumb on my clit as his lips move against mine. His free arm is holding up one of my legs, spreading me wider for him. It makes him hit the perfect spot inside me, and I feel the beginnings of an orgasm building.

"Ell," I moan as he picks up his pace. My gaze drops to where his cock is sliding in and out of me. This doesn't feel real, yet it's all I *can* feel.

"Wren, fuck," Elliot chokes out. His whole body shudders as he slows his thrusts. He buries his face in the crook of my neck, his tear-stained cheeks pressing against my skin as he comes.

My eyes are squeezed shut as I place a tender kiss to Elliot's head. As he stops moving, the pleasure fades from my body. It's replaced with the same ache in my chest that's been present since the moment I realized the guys weren't coming home, except now it's ten times more painful.

How am I supposed to let him go?

"I didn't . . . didn't want to come that fast," he says breathlessly.

"It's okay." I move to get down, not wanting him to have to hold any of my weight when he sounds so tired.

"Uh uh." He grabs my ass, and he lifts me fully into his arms. "We're not done until you come."

"Elliot, it's okay, we don't—"

"No."

The way he says it quells my protests. Elliot needs this—possibly more than I do.

Holding me gently, Elliot walks over to the bed and sets me on the edge. He kneels in front of me, spreading my thighs and staring at me longingly. “God, I’ve missed this.”

As I prop myself up on my elbows, Elliot lowers his head and gently swipes his tongue over my clit. I inhale sharply.

“Love,” he groans as he slips two fingers into me. He curls them expertly as he sucks on my clit.

I keep my moans quiet, unsure of how much Axel and Finn can hear outside. My stomach tightens, and my eyes begin to close, but I blink them open again, wanting to savor every second we have. I keep my gaze locked on Elliot as his arms wrap around my thighs.

This can’t be our last time.

It can’t be.

I won’t let it be.

“Ell,” I whisper, trying to ignore the pressure building behind my eyes.

His eyes meet mine for a brief second before he closes them again. As he sucks on my clit, he flicks it with his tongue, ripping a breathless moan from me.

Within seconds, I’m falling, clapping a hand over my mouth to stifle my cry. As I come, tears fill my eyes, and I sob out Elliot’s name. Pleasure courses through me, making my thoughts foggy, but pain chases it all. My tears spill onto my cheeks as he pulls his head away, and he frowns.

“Wren.” Elliot crawls onto the bed and lies down next to me. Sliding an arm under me, he pulls me close and tucks my head into his chest.

“I don’t want you to go back.” My voice breaks as I say it because I know it’s no use. The others are dead if he doesn’t.

“It’s only for a couple days,” he says soothingly. “And then we’ll never leave your side again.”

“Please,” I sob. “Elliot, please, I need you all to come back to me alive.”

“I promise,” he whispers, and I wish I could pretend he didn’t hesitate.

I’m not sure how long we stay there before we hear a knock on the door. Immediately, I tense, realizing the door is unlocked and I’m completely naked.

“Just give us a minute,” Elliot calls. He crawls over me and grabs my bra and shirt from the ground before helping me pull them on.

“What if something goes wrong?” I ask.

“I . . . I don’t know, love.” Elliot grabs the rest of our clothes and sorts through them. “But the plan is for everything to go *right.”*

Neither of us voice what we’re both thinking—that was the plan the day after the wedding, too.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” I say as I continue getting dressed. “I do, Ell. But . . .”

“Life is unpredictable,” he finishes for me, “and working with Axel feels wrong.”

Nodding, I hug myself. “Obviously, tonight wasn’t a trap to capture me, but what if it was a bigger one? What if . . . oh, I don’t know! I’m just so scared, Ell.”

“I know,” Elliot says softly. He draws me into his embrace, kissing me tenderly, before his arms fall from my waist.

No, everything in me screams. *Don’t let him go. You may never see him again.*

But I don’t move as he opens the door to let Finn and Axel back in. I don’t beg for him to come with us. I can’t. If Elliot runs with me and Finn,

it means a guaranteed death sentence for Rhett and Oliver, along with Rhett's brothers. Even if leaving Elliot means there's a possibility that he won't make it out alive, I refuse to abandon the others. I can't live without them, either.

"We worked out the rest of the details," Finn says, car keys in his hand.

Elliot zips my jacket up and pulls me in for one last kiss. "Three days, love."

"Three days." Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I step back, immediately missing his warmth. "I love you."

His knuckles brush my cheek. "I love you, too."

Finn pulls me away, his gaze locked on Elliot. "Stay safe."

"You too. I'll see you soon."

As Finn and I exit the room and walk across the parking lot, I stifle my sobs. It feels like my heart is being ripped in two.

I open the passenger side door to Finn's car and look back to find Elliot still standing in the open doorway. He's barely more than a silhouette, framed by the light coming from the motel room behind him.

"Get in, Wren," Finn tells me.

But my feet are stuck on the pavement. I'm frozen, unsure of how I'm supposed to turn away.

Time seems to slow for a few seconds as we watch each other. I thought I knew pain—thought I knew grief—but the ache blooming in my chest threatens to overtake me completely.

Finn starts the car.

I can't do this.

"Ell," I whisper as the first tear falls. Fear grips my heart, and I'm halfway across the parking lot before I realize I'm running.

Elliot steps onto the sidewalk. As I get closer, his features come into view, a tortured look on his face. I fling myself into his arms, unable to keep myself from him.

Just one more minute. Just one more.

I sob into Elliot's damp shirt, and my knees give out. My body can't take it anymore—the worry, the pain, the loneliness.

"Love." Elliot's voice breaks as he locks his arms around me.

"You can't die, Ell," I cry. "You can't."

"Wren, I—"

"Please," I choke out, fully aware that I'm being too loud. Too emotional in a situation that doesn't allow for any. "Please tell me I'll see you again. Please tell me we'll all be okay, and we can go home soon and eat ice cream and watch movies and fall asleep together. That we—that we can go on that trip you mentioned, and I can meet Oliver's family, and we can open a bookstore together, and—"

More sobs wrack my body, cutting my pleas short. I'm vaguely aware of being lowered to the ground, of Elliot joining me on the cold sidewalk. He pulls me into his body protectively, and I pray to whatever is out there—fate, gods, maybe nothing—that it won't be the last time.

"I'll do everything I can," Elliot tells me, and when I look up at him, his eyes are glistening.

"So will I," I whisper shakily.

"He won't win, Wren." Elliot's hand smooths my hair back from my face. "We've come so far—too far to lose each other. I promise you, we'll make it out alive, and we'll come back to you. You'll get us out."

I'm aware that they're somewhat empty words—that Elliot can't really promise all that—but I soak it up anyway. If I'm going to make it through

the next few days, I need some kind of hope to cling to.

“But right now,” Elliot says, “I have to go, love. If we stay out much longer, Ludo will get suspicious.”

That will only make things much, much worse, so when Finn offers me a hand to help me up, I take it. My gaze falls to Axel for a split second, and I swear his eyes are a hint glossier than they were earlier. His jaw is clenched, his hands shoved into his jacket pockets, as he turns away from me.

This time, Finn stays on my side of the car until I’m buckled in and the door is closed. With tears streaming down my face, I look out the window and watch Axel and Elliot head to the black SUV.

Elliot looks back just before he climbs in. I wave, and he waves back, and after that I have to turn away.

Aside from my sniffles and muffled sobs, the drive home is silent. It feels so much faster than the drive to the motel did.

A dark gray sedan is parked in the driveway, and Finn parks next to it, seemingly undisturbed by the extra vehicle.

“There’s someone here,” I say, my voice scratchy.

“They’re supposed to be.”

Finn doesn’t seem to be in the mood to elaborate, so I silently follow him inside. The lights are already on, and I peer into the house as I slip my jacket off my shoulders.

Sparrow is standing in the mudroom, her locs twisted into a bun on top of her head and her thumbs hooked into the pockets of her dark jeans. And there, right next to her, is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. Her smile is as bright as ever despite the tears in her warm brown eyes.

My jacket drops to the floor as confusion, relief, and worry swirl through my mind.

“Aubrey!”

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Chapter Thirteen

Wren

The porch swing sways slightly as Aubrey and I slowly catch up over coffee. The morning air carries a chill to it, but with the blanket settled over our laps and hot mugs in our hands, we're staying warm enough.

Last night, Aubrey and I only talked for a minute before Finn forced us to go to sleep. I was so tired that I don't even remember climbing into bed.

Sparrow agreed to bring Aubrey back on two conditions. First, that she stays with Aubrey at all times, and second, that Aubrey doesn't risk going out in public. When Aubrey found out what happened, she was more than happy to comply with those.

"I'm happy Finn asked Sparrow if I could come back for you," Aubrey says as she places one of her hands over mine. She has her curls up in a cloud-like bun, although she left some out to frame her face.

My heart warms. I didn't realize he's the one who made this happen.

"How was Elliot?" she asks.

"He was . . ." My hand tightens around my mug. "He was broken up. He told us that he got caught sneaking into Oliver's room, and that Ludo

punished Oliver for it instead of Elliot. He didn't elaborate, but he was *crying*, Aubrey. He said Oliver was in so much pain—that he couldn't bear to watch it happen again."

"God," Aubrey whispers. "I'm so sorry, Wren."

Maggie is sniffing around in the backyard, and I watch her. If I look at Aubrey, I'll see how worried she is, and then I'll start crying again. It's not that Aubrey wouldn't understand, but I'm just so tired of all the tears.

"I'm worried that Holloway will torture him again before we can save them," I mutter. "Or that he'll kill them before the meeting. I don't think I could go on if I lose them."

"You'll get them out," Aubrey says firmly. "If there's one thing I know about Ludo, it's that he likes to draw the pain of his enemies out. He's probably enjoying the fact that the guys are terrified. The longer they sit in it, the more scared they'll be. He knows that."

"I hope so."

A gust of wind sends a shiver through me, so I take a slow sip of my coffee. For a few minutes, we sit in silence, watching the sun peek over the trees.

"How've things been for you?" I ask. It's only been a couple weeks, but I've missed Aubrey so much, and I'm curious how her new life has been treating her.

"All right. I love my new apartment. It has a view of the ocean, and I put my writing desk right in front of a window." She giggles. "I've been doing more staring out and watching the waves than writing. Might have to move my workspace to a different spot without the view."

"Have you made any friends?"

“I think so,” she says. “My neighbors are really nice. They’re an older couple, and they both love to knit, which I think is adorable.”

“That is,” I say with a smile.

Aubrey looks like she’s about to go on, but Finn steps onto the back porch, his tablet in his hand. Immediately, Maggie bounds over to us, her tail wagging back and forth.

Pausing, Finn takes a second to scratch behind her ears. When he straightens, his expression is grim.

“We have a problem.”

Dread knots my stomach. *No, no, no.*

Finn strides over to us before holding out the tablet for us to see. He has the security footage from the guys’ mansion pulled up.

An unfamiliar sedan is parked in the driveway, and a woman is marching up the path to the front door.

“Do you know who that is?” I ask, absentmindedly petting Maggie.

“Meredith Moore—Oliver’s mom.”

My stomach drops. What if Holloway has men keeping an eye on the place? What if they take her since they can’t get their hands on me?

“I knew this would happen,” Finn mutters. “Oliver is close to his family. It’s been too long since she’s heard from him last. You need to contact her before she goes to the police.”

“Me? What the hell am I supposed to say?”

“I’ve only met Meredith once, and she doesn’t like me much, so it can’t be me.” Finn has already closed the app for the security system and opened up a browser. Within seconds, he has her address pulled up, along with her phone number. “You need to tell her something.”

“Like what? It can’t be the truth!”

“Think of something. Once she’s off the property, you’re calling her and scheduling a time to meet.”

“To meet? Where?”

At that, Finn pauses. There’s no way he’ll want her coming over here. In his mind, that would mean the farmhouse is forever compromised, and we’d have to move on. There’s his cabin, but I don’t think he’ll want to reveal its location, either.

“It can’t be somewhere public,” I say. We can’t be too careful. “But if she’s being followed—”

“I know.”

“Can’t we just talk over the phone?”

“If she freaks out, we need to be able to contain her reaction.”

I blink. *Contain her reaction? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?* “You’re not talking about killing her, are you?”

“What? Jesus, Wren. No! I’m not killing Oliver’s mother.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “Then what does *containing her* mean?”

“Potential . . .” Finn grimaces. “Potential kidnapping?”

“Got it. Killing Meredith is off the table, but deeply traumatizing her is still okay.” My tone is dry as I level him with an annoyed glare.

“Listen, I never said I was perfect, okay? But if she doesn’t believe your cover story and she ends up going to the authorities, we’re all in deep shit, you understand? That adds a level of complications that I’m not sure we can get out of. We have to tread carefully.”

“I suppose the guys told me she’ll do anything for her kids.”

“Exactly. And I don’t want to deal with babysitting her if she decides to take matters into her own hands.”

“Okay. So I tell her the guys went on a last-minute business trip. That’s normal enough, right?”

“And why wouldn’t he be answering his phone?”

“He lost it?”

Finn shakes his head. “She’s close with Elliot and Rhett, too. There has to be a reason why they’ve *all* stopped contacting her suddenly. One that doesn’t set off any alarm bells in her head.”

“Or . . . ?”

“Or we’ll have to contain her.”

“Right,” I mutter. I don’t like that option. “What about Maria?”

“Let’s just deal with Meredith first. We can set up a meeting. Does she like hiking?”

“How am I supposed to know?!”

“She likes hiking now.” He taps away at the tablet before angling the screen toward me. He has a park pulled up. “You’ll tell her to meet you here on Trail B.”

“Why there?”

“Because we can get to it through the woods out back. If anyone’s watching her or tracking her car, it’ll look like she went on a hike by herself and then went home. Where’s the phone I gave you?”

“I have it here.” Careful not to spill my coffee, I fish it from my pocket.

“Got it.” He’s staring at his tablet again, frowning. “Okay, looks like she’s about to leave. Call her now.”

After exchanging a worried glance with Aubrey, I dial the phone number Finn gives me. Meredith picks up on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Um . . . hi. Meredith, I—”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Wren. Oli—”

“Where’s Oliver?” she asks immediately.

My heart is beating rapidly as I try to keep my voice even. “We need to talk. Can you meet me?”

“When?”

“Now would be great,” I say, glancing at Finn, who nods. I tell her where to meet me, praying she won’t find it suspicious that I’m asking her to meet me in the middle of the woods.

“I can be there in forty-five minutes,” Meredith says.

“Okay, that sounds—”

The line goes dead, and disappointment winds through me. It’s stupid, but I guess I was hoping for her to sound happier that we finally get to meet. Under these circumstances, though, I’m not particularly happy either.

“She’s coming?” Finn asks.

I nod. “She sounds angry, but yeah, she’ll meet me.”

“At least she cares enough about Oliver to look for him like this,” Aubrey says softly.

Finn grunts in response. “Life is a lot easier when you don’t have all these people who *care* about you,” he grumbles, but there’s a strange undercurrent to his voice. Jealousy, maybe?

No, I realize. *Longing.*

For all his talk about working alone, Finn has adjusted quite well to having me around twenty-four-seven. I’m curious about his past, like if he had siblings or if he had any close friends before the guys, but I don’t ask. This isn’t the time, nor does he seem like the type who opens up easily.

“Get ready to go,” Finn says. “The hike will take a while.”

. . .

I wait in the woods by myself, leaning against a tree and scanning the path for Meredith. Finn is somewhere out of sight. When I asked why he can't wait with me, he said he doesn't want to deal with Meredith yelling at him.

Not what I want to hear.

Shifting nervously, I go over what I'm planning on telling her. It's pretty easy since it doesn't involve lying at all. Finn will probably kill me, but I'm following my gut on this one. I have to.

Since I haven't met Meredith, I'm judging her character solely based off what the guys have told me about her. She sounds tough as steel, impossibly determined, and fiercely protective of her children.

It's what made me land on the decision to tell her the truth. If she understands the whole situation, then she'll realize she needs to step back and let our plan unfold as-is. It's the smartest option, and she cares about Oliver, so she won't want to get in the way and potentially mess things up.

That's what I'm counting on, anyway.

Whatever issues she has with Finn won't help things, considering I need her to trust us. I'm hoping that she can trust me, though—or at least trust that the guys trust me.

What if she hates me?

Not what you should be thinking of right now, Wren.

When Meredith comes into view, she's walking cautiously up the path. Her eyes sweep over the forest before they lock on me, and a chill settles over me.

I thought the first time I met Meredith, she'd smile, and we'd hug, and we'd have some awkward small talk before we got comfortable with each other. But she's not smiling. Her brows are pulled down, and her lips are pressed together into a thin line.

As she moves toward me with careful steps, my heart rate picks up. Her glare is murderous, and her hand is resting on a gun that's holstered at her hip.

Does she think I have something to do with Oliver's disappearance?

You do, I remind myself. *This is all your fault.*

"Where the hell is my son?" Meredith demands. She comes to a stop in front of me, and I'm struck by how similar her and Oliver look. He has her eyes, although at the moment, Meredith's are void of the warmth I'm so used to.

"I . . ." My words catch in my throat. *God, I miss him.*

"You were cryptic enough on the phone," she snaps. "Tell me where Oliver is, and tell me *now."*

"He's gone," I whisper. It's the best I can manage for the moment. I wasn't prepared for the onslaught of emotions that come with the way I keep seeing Oliver in every move she makes.

At the tears in my eyes, Meredith's hard glare fades. She opens her mouth, an apology written on her face, but then she shakes her head. "What do you mean, he's gone?" Her voice isn't as harsh now. "I need more details."

Just take a couple deep breaths. It'll be okay. On some level, I understand that her impatience is due to fear, not hate. She's worried for her son, just like I am.

“He was . . . taken,” I say, trying to gather my thoughts. I planned what I was going to tell her down to the word, but now my thoughts are so scattered.

“And the others?” she asks, her voice rising with alarm. “Where are Elliot and Rhett?”

“They were taken, too.” Digging my fingernails into my palms, I blink back my tears, trying to calm my nerves. “We’ve been trying to get them back.”

“We?” Meredith asks.

“Me and Finn.”

She narrows her eyes. “Is he the cause of all this? I knew he couldn’t be trusted. I *knew—”*

“It’s my fault,” I blurt. “They were taken because of me.”

Shit, shit, shit. I really shouldn’t’ve started off with that. Now she’s gonna want to kill me.

But Meredith just stares at me in shock. *“Your* fault? What did you do?”

I swallow. “I think . . . I think I should start from the beginning.”

“By all means.” She crosses her arms, watching me through narrowed eyes.

“When Sammy was killed, the guys couldn’t let it go. Rhett . . . Rhett especially.”

Meredith’s face falls, but she stays silent.

“It took them a long time to find the man who shot her—a man named Ludo Holloway.”

“They found him?” she asks, her voice weighed down with years of grief.

“Yes. They’ve been working to get closer to him for some time now, and they’ve been planning his downfall for years.”

Meredith scoffs. “With what time? They’re so busy with work that they —” She pauses, realization crossing her features. “They’re not investment bankers, are they?”

I shake my head. “It was their cover. They didn’t want to lie to you, I promise, but they didn’t want to worry you.”

“And now?”

“They got caught,” I say, “and Holloway captured them.”

Despair bleeds onto Meredith’s features. Sammy wasn’t her daughter by blood, but it sounds like they were close. This probably feels like losing another child. “Who is he? What’ll he do to them?”

“He’s a mob boss—a powerful one. He hasn’t killed them yet, but that’s his eventual plan.”

“And this is all your fault *how?”* she asks.

“Because I’m the reason they got caught. And now—and now they’re the ones paying for it instead of me.”

Meredith’s jaw clenches, but she doesn’t rip into me the way I’ve been expecting. “This Ludo Holloway,” she says. “Do you know where he’s keeping the boys?”

“I do.”

Her gaze sharpens, her posture straightening. “Where?”

“Wren, don’t.” Finn steps out from behind a tree.

“You,” Meredith seethes. “Were you involved in this?”

“I’m helping to *rescue* them,” Finn says irritatedly. “But no, I had very little to do with their capture. I’m not the bad influence you think I am.”

“You got Oliver hurt!”

“Once! And it wasn’t even that bad.” Finn turns to me and rolls his eyes. “Last time I ever try to teach someone how to do a backflip.”

I blink. *What?* He's got to be joking. *That's* why Meredith doesn't like him?

"He had to go to the *hospital!"* Meredith exclaims.

"Yeah, well, I thought he'd be better at it than he was."

Meredith bites back her retort, waving a hand at Finn dismissively. "Whatever. That's not what matters right now. We need to find them."

"We already have a plan in place," I tell her. "They'll be home in a couple days."

"A couple days? This man wants to kill them!"

"We have reason to believe he won't yet," Finn says. "The situation is . . . complicated. We have to move carefully, or there'll be more collateral damage."

"But—"

"We have to wait," he snaps. "That's not negotiable."

Meredith looks ready to strangle Finn, but instead she takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. "What can I do to help?"

Crossing his arms, Finn glares down at her. "We have this under control, and we don't need someone getting in our way."

"What, you expect me to stand by and do *nothing?* My son's life is at stake!"

"And you'll be putting it even more at stake by getting involved," Finn snaps. "Let the professionals handle this."

"The professionals," Meredith says flatly. "What exactly do you do?" She turns to me. "And you? Aren't you a barista?"

"She's not helping, either," Finn says. "Not more than she already has."

"Wait, what?" I turn to him. "I'm not coming with you?"

“I can’t divert half my attention to keeping you safe,” he replies apologetically. “If you were further along in your training, then it’d be a different story, but—”

“No! I can help. At least with getting the money from the storage units. I know I can’t help during the ambush, but you’re going to need a getaway driver. Can’t I—”

“And if someone sees you?”

“I just won’t be seen!”

Finn shakes his head. “I can handle being the driver.”

Crossing my arms, I glare up at him. “You know you’ll have to get out of there as soon as possible. You need someone else.”

“If she needs protection, I can provide that,” Meredith says. She’s standing taller now, her expression confident.

“You?” Finn spits out. “Haven’t you worked as a nurse for most of your life?”

“I had a second job in security when Oliver was in high school,” Meredith replies coolly. “I can guard Wren while she waits in the car.”

“That sounds like a good option to me,” I say. “It’ll be safe *and* efficient. You know we can’t stick around to get caught by the cops. Not with the amount of gunshots there’ll be.”

Gritting his teeth, Finn glances between the two of us. I’m sure he wasn’t expecting Meredith and I to team up like this, but for the moment, we have a common goal.

And hopefully it’ll make her like me.

Oh my god, Wren. Priorities!

“I’ll think on it,” he grits out.

“No,” I say. “You’re not the only one who gets to make decisions here. Just *think,* Finn. Three of you are going to be in the unit, and two of you are going to be waiting on the roof of the next building. Once the shots are fired, you’re going to have to move fast. If we’re already in the vehicle, we can drive right up to the unit, you guys can pile in, and we can be out in no time.”

Finn just sighs.

“Based on my limited knowledge of your plan, Wren is right,” Meredith says. “My son has been through enough, and so have Elliot and Rhett. I don’t want the police anywhere near them. We need to be long gone by the time they show up.”

Finn is glowering, but it’s not like he can stop us. At least, I hope he doesn’t try to.

“Maybe you should stay with us,” I blurt, turning to Meredith. “Just in case Ludo’s men were watching the guys’ house. They tried to kidnap me, and they might do the same to you.”

“I can come pick you up later,” Finn says, “but we need to make sure no one’s been following you.”

Meredith rolls her eyes. “I know how to lose a tail. Just tell me what address to head to, and I can be there by tonight.”

“No,” Finn bites out. “I’ll come to you. I’m already compromising enough.”

“Fine. But give me an hour or so to pack.” Meredith turns to me, and my breath catches at the warmth in her eyes. “I’m sorry I was so short earlier. My children are my world and my first priority.”

“It’s—”

“And that extends to you,” she continues, reaching out and taking my hand in hers. “I know you weren’t ready to meet yet, so I’m especially sorry it had to happen like this, but it’s good to finally put a face to your name.”

“You, too,” I say thickly. Some of the weight on my shoulders dissipates at her smile.

“I’ll see you both soon,” she says, turning to Finn. “I’m assuming I don’t need to tell you where I live?”

“I’ll be there in two hours,” Finn replies.

With a nod, Meredith turns and heads back the way she came.

I slump against the tree again and let out a long, relieved breath. That went better than I hoped it would.

“You could’ve told me you were planning on telling her the truth,” Finn grits out.

“Would you have tried to stop me?”

He huffs. “Whatever. Let’s go.”

After giving Meredith one last glance, I turn to follow Finn. My heart feels lighter on our walk back.

Two days. And then they’re home again.

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Chapter Fourteen

Rhett

The next couple days are agonizing. I wait for Axel to give me an update, but one never comes. Whenever we're in the same room together, he barely even looks my way.

He and Ludo seem extra busy. I suppose now that Holloway's fake honeymoon is over, it's back to work like usual. They both seem more tense than normal.

As for me and Benny, our schedule stays mostly the same. I'm able to spend time with him for a little bit after breakfast, during lunch, and then after dinner. His tutor is nice, and I wonder how much Ludo is paying her to keep quiet.

My hope dwindles with every day. Seeing Oliver and Elliot in their windows doesn't help, either. Especially Oliver—he looks worse and worse every time I'm able to catch a glimpse of him.

"Did you like school?" Benny asks me one day after dinner. Apparently, he had an especially difficult time focusing today, although Axel still slipped him a package of sour gummies.

“Depends on the subject,” I reply, catching the ball he throws my way and tossing it back. “And the grade.”

“What was your favorite grade?”

“Probably eleventh.”

“Why?”

“Before I got together with two of my partners, I—”

“You have two partners?”

“I have three, actually. Two boyfriends I met in high school, and a girlfriend we all met later.”

“Huh. That’s cool.” He tosses the ball back.

“I didn’t start dating Elliot and Oliver until senior year,” I say. “Not until after Sam died. The year before that, Ell, O, and I had gotten really close, you know? And Sammy was still alive, and even though Richard was neglectful, I felt like I had a family I could trust.”

When I throw the ball back, Benny holds it, his expression turning contemplative. “I wish I had that.”

“You have Andrew, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Benny says on a sigh. “He’s an asshole sometimes, though. And my mom . . . I don’t know. Sometimes she’s great. Sometimes she’s not. I just wish . . .”

“You were born to different parents?”

He nods, and he drops to the ground, setting the ball in his lap. “Yeah.”

“I used to wish the same thing all the time.” Coming closer, I sit down next to him. I’m pretty sure he was getting bored of playing catch, anyway.

“I’ve got you, though, right?” Benny asks, looking up at me. “You can be my family now?”

I smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I hope.

"What if Mom and Dad try to fight Andrew and win?"

"We won't let them." I don't elaborate. For now, I can let him think that *we* is me and Ludo, not that it's me, the guys, and Wren.

Letting out a breath, Benny flops onto his back. He's got a lot on his shoulders for a twelve-year-old. No kid should ever have to deal with an abusive parent, let alone having to figure out a way to get free of one.

"You won't have to go back to living with Richard," I promise him. "I'll do whatever I can to make sure that's the case."

I'm not delusional enough to think that Benny fully trusts me yet. That'll come with time, as long as I work to prove myself. Making sure Holloway doesn't kill us all is the first step. Dealing with Richard will be the second. And after that . . .

While Benny and I sit in the grass, I let myself dream. Even before we were captured, I didn't give myself the space to think about the future much. I've known it'll be nice, and I want us all to have a chance to live out our dreams. Both Elliot and Oliver have so many things they want to do. I think Wren does, too—she just has to finish uncovering the parts of herself she buried. As for me, all I care about is that we're happy. I want to see them get everything they want and be there to help when things get rough.

Things will be different now that Benny and Andrew are in the picture. They both need people in their life who can help them unlearn the ideologies and patterns that come with being raised by Richard.

"Will I get to meet your partners?" Benny asks after a while.

I let myself smile fully. "Yeah. I think you'll like them."

"And we can all be a family together." Benny says it so quietly I almost don't hear, but the hope in his voice tugs at my heart.

That's all I want, I think, unsure of what or whom I'm pleading with or why I'm even bothering. *I just want to help see my family succeed. See them happy and together.*

Reaching over, I squeeze Benny's hand, ignoring the pressure building behind my eyes. "I'd like that."

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Chapter Fifteen

Elliot

The night before Ludo’s big meeting, Axel takes me out on another job. He’s silent as he ushers me downstairs. When we pass Ludo in the foyer, something feels different than last time.

“Wait,” Ludo says just as we’re about to step outside.

I stop, only turning to face Holloway when Axel glares at me. “What?”

“Did you see Benny this evening?”

“I see him every evening,” I grit out. Watching him and Rhett outside is the only thing I have to look forward to.

“He seemed happy, didn’t he?”

Swallowing down the hateful words I want to throw at him, I nod. “He did. Him and Rhett seem to be getting along well.”

“It’d be a shame if something were to happen to change that, wouldn’t it?”

Cold dread fills my lungs, and I struggle to get in a full breath. I feel myself going stiff at Ludo’s satisfied smile. “Is there a reason for it to change?”

“What? Oh! No.” His smirk widens. “Benny will be perfectly fine—as long as you comply.”

I am *complying*, I want to grit out, but I don’t want to upset him. Doing that could mean another session in the basement for Oliver—or something happening to Benny. So I just bite my tongue and nod.

“Same as always, Axel,” Ludo says. “Bring him right back when you’re done and report to me immediately.”

“You got it, boss.”

Without another word, Ludo turns on his heel and heads up the stairs. Axel clears his throat behind me, and when I whip around to face him, he looks nervous.

“Let’s get going,” he says.

In the SUV, I grab the folder that’s sitting on the backseat. I was hoping Axel would have something else up his sleeve, but it doesn’t look like that’s the case.

One more day, I remind myself. In twenty-four hours, we’ll be home again, and Ludo will be locked away, not us.

It’s not until Axel pulls out of the driveway that I start looking through the folder. Everything looks fairly normal until I flip a page and come across a photograph of my target.

At first, I don’t believe what I’m seeing. I peer at the photo closer, and then I flip back through the pages.

No. No, this can’t be happening.

There has to be some kind of mistake.

“There’s something wrong with this.” I close the folder. “I think you grabbed the wrong profile or something.”

“I didn’t.”

“No, this . . .” I open the folder again, flipping through the pages and photos as if they’ll somehow be different. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“His mother is a judge.”

“Yeah, Wren mentioned meeting her at the wedding. She had to go home early because one of her kids got sick.” My stomach churns as I stare at the smiling little boy in the pictures.

“Ludo needed her to bend to his will, but she’s holding firm,” Axel says. “Ludo has tried everything. Flattery, bribery, blackmail, you name it. She’s retaliated by trying to report him to the authorities and hiring a security team.”

“I’m assuming the police did nothing.”

“She didn’t have any proof. He’s meticulous about covering his tracks.”

“But . . .” The edges of the pages crinkle as my hands curl into fists. “But he’s a child.”

Of course, I’m not surprised. I’m well aware of the fact that Holloway doesn’t care about children. But forcing me to kill one in cold blood? It’s a new low—one I hadn’t expected. So far, all the hit jobs he’s forced me on were adults.

“He can’t think that *murdering her child* will get her on his side,” I grit out.

“He’s already found a way to work around her,” Axel replies. “This isn’t about coercion anymore. It’s about sending a message.”

“Axel.” His name comes out breathlessly, coated in disbelief.

No, no, no.

“Axel, I can’t kill a kid.”

That’s how this all started.

“If you have any other ideas, I’m open to them. I’m willing to work with you on this.” He’s still staring straight ahead, but the discomfort on his face is as clear as day.

“I . . .” My gaze drops to the folder again.

Benny will be perfectly fine—as long as you comply.

“Fuck.” I slam the folder shut and rub my face. “That fucking bastard.”

“Ludo wants it done quietly—asphyxiation. He wants it to look like it’s possible that it was an accident, or that the kid was unwell and no one realized.”

“That way Bernadette can’t try to pin it on him.” Slowly, I sink down in my seat.

“He hasn’t asked for proof of any of your other kills,” Axel says quietly. “They’ve all been verified later as he’s organically heard about them, of course. But he only has to believe us for twelve hours.”

“What are you saying?” I watch him carefully, my heart beating erratically.

“I could lie. We could stay out for the appropriate amount of time, then head back, and I could report that you killed the kid. It’d help if you acted broken up about it.”

“You think that’d work?”

“Possibly. It’s your call if you want to risk it. And if you don’t want to do it . . .” Axel shifts in his seat and swallows. “Killing a child is the last thing I want to do, but if it’s what needs to be done, I could do it myself.”

As we start moving again, I shake my head. I can’t let that little boy die. But I can’t let anything happen to Benny, either.

Could I risk it? It’s not like something would be reported in the news by tomorrow morning, especially if Ludo wants it to look like the kid died in

his sleep. Holloway knows there'd have to be an autopsy and an investigation before things got into the papers or on TV.

But . . . what if there's an angle I'm not thinking of? What if Ludo has an informant close to the kid's family? Or what if he suspects something?

My heart sinks. An image of Oliver cuffed to that chair, crying and screaming, flits through my mind. It makes my throat close up until my lungs are burning. I can't do anything that could potentially put him back there.

We slow to a stop at an intersection, and Axel closes his eyes. The red traffic light washes over his skin. He looks pained—more than I ever expected he would. It's yet another reminder that I don't really know who he is.

"I can do it," he says quietly.

"No. Just . . . just let me think this through. He's never asked for proof of the other kills?"

"Other than me reporting back to him at the end of the night, he hasn't asked for more. He trusts me. And since the news of all your kills have made its way back to him, he has no reason to doubt me."

"So if you don't have proof, it won't be odd."

"Correct."

"And . . . and if you *did* have proof, but only for this one, that'd be . . . that'd be abnormal."

Axel is silent for a few seconds before he says, "It would be."

Part of me has been toying with the idea of sneaking in and just taking a picture of the kid while he's asleep. Ludo wouldn't be able to tell if the boy was dead or alive.

“Then we can’t have proof,” I say. “He’d get suspicious if we tried to go the extra mile to say I did it.”

“Are you saying you want to risk it?”

“I—” My voice falters. *Can I?* Can I put everyone’s lives in danger to save one?

But it’s not that simple. We got into this because Holloway killed a child. We can’t get out of it because I end up stooping to his level.

“Yes,” I say thickly, my hands gripping the folder. “We’re going to risk it.”

. . .

When we arrive at the mansion, I don’t have to fake my tears. All it takes is a single thought of Oliver, and they spring to my eyes immediately. I was a fool for thinking I could stay awake that night. I wanted to be close to him—to comfort him—but all I did was make everything so much worse.

I’ll never be able to make it up to him.

This time, Ludo is waiting in the foyer. It’s a first, but part of me was expecting it. This is another form of torture for him to enjoy inflicting on me.

“It’s done?” Ludo asks Axel, even though he’s watching me.

“It’s done.”

“Did he put up much of a fight?”

Axel hesitates before nodding. “At first.”

A sob is ripped from my throat, and I fall to my knees. It’s not an act. There’s no way I wouldn’t’ve put up a fight, so Axel can’t lie about that, but if anything else happens to Oliver or Benny . . .

Maybe if I act upset enough, they won't even cross Holloway's mind.

"Please," I beg, looking up at Ludo through my tears. "Please don't make me do that again."

The only thing shining in his eyes is cruel delight. He comes to stand over me, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. "You've managed to surprise me, Hayes. I really didn't think you had it in you." He laughs. "Although I suppose, given the alternative, you were probably happy to do it."

I grit my teeth, doing my best to stop my tears. Raising my head, I glare at Ludo silently.

Holloway's smirk only grows. "I hope the image of his lifeless body haunts you for the rest of your short, pathetic life. Axel, take him to his room."

After yanking me to my feet, Axel drags me upstairs and shoves me in my room. He doesn't spare me a glance before spinning around and stalking down the hallway. The men guarding my room close the door, but not before I see a look of unease pass between them.

My guess is they have no idea what I was sent out to do. But that doesn't change the fact that their report of the night will make its way to Holloway.

I think of Wren and how hard it was to say goodbye to her. Of Oliver's screams and begging, of the longing in Rhett's eyes whenever he glances up at our windows.

Curling up on my mattress, I sob loudly until exhaustion washes over me. "Please be enough," I whisper into the dark room.

I can't watch him get hurt again.

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Chapter Sixteen

Wren

I keep my head tucked down as I throw the last bag into the back of Finn's SUV. "That's everything?"

"Yep. Let's get the hell out of here."

We pile into the car. It's just me, Finn, and Meredith, and she takes the backseat. We left before Sparrow and Aubrey were up so we could make sure we had ample time to hit all of Ludo's storage units. That was the last one, so it's time to head back to the farmhouse.

As Finn pulls out of the parking lot, I breathe out a sigh of relief. I was worried we'd get caught, but all we had to do was act like we were supposed to be there, and no one stopped us. Hell, at most of the places, we didn't even see anyone.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, so I pull it out, seeing a notification from Ava. I texted her and gave her my temporary number so I can give her updates. So far, everything I've told her is vague, but she's been understanding.

Ava: Hey, your mom and Thomas stopped by the coffee shop today.

My stomach drops. *What?* Why are they in town? They never visit this often.

Frowning, I replay my last conversation with my mom in my head. We were fighting—over Thomas, of course—and then I hung up on her. She texted me a few times after that, but I ignored her. Since I left my phone at home, I have no idea how many times she's tried to get in contact with me over the past couple weeks.

Wren: Did she say what she wanted?

Ava: She was looking for you. Said she was worried because you weren't answering your phone.

I chew on my bottom lip. How long ago was that phone call? A few weeks? A month? Over a month? This isn't the first time I've stopped talking to her, but I've never gone this long before.

Shit. Is she worried about me? I figured she'd just think I was extra mad at her.

Ava: I told them that you quit working here and that you moved in with your boyfriends, and that if you weren't answering your phone, it's because you don't want to talk.

That makes me smile. Leave it to Ava to be as blunt as possible with them. She doesn't know everything about my mom and stepdad, but she knows enough.

Wren: Thank you. I'm sorry you had to deal with them.

Ava: Are you doing okay?

Wren: Yeah. I'm hoping that everything will go back to semi-normal in a couple days.

Ava: Take your time, babe. We'll catch up whenever you're ready.

Smiling, I shut off my screen. I'm going to have to find some way to make the past couple months up to her. She's been in the dark with barely any updates. Even now, she *still* doesn't know what's going on, and it's not bugging her.

When we get back to the farmhouse, Sparrow and Aubrey are up. They help us unload all the cash, and we store it in a side room off the garage that we emptied out yesterday.

"How'd it go?" Sparrow asks once we're all inside the house.

"Fine," Finn says. "You heard anything?"

"Nothing yet. You leaving again soon?"

Finn nods. "Wren, Meredith, we're leaving in an hour. I'm about to send the emails to King and Burbank."

"Whoa, wait." Sparrow holds up a hand and glances at Aubrey. "Raymond King?"

"The one and only. What's it to you?"

"That's the man who's threatening my parents," Aubrey says.

"Wait, really?" I ask.

Aubrey nods. "It's one of the reasons why Ludo was such a good option for me to marry since they're in business together."

"Well . . ." Finn shrugs. "Two birds with one stone, then."

Aubrey's shoulders drop. "Oh my god. My parents will be so relieved."

"Be ready," Finn tells me and Meredith again before turning and walking back toward the house.

My stomach flips. It won't be much longer after that I'll be able to see the guys. As long as they get out of Ludo's mansion safely, that is.

They will, I tell myself, trying to combat the anxiety that tightens around my heart. *We'll get them out.*

“You look like you need to clear your head.” Sparrow squeezes my shoulder. “Let’s head outside for a bit.”

“Just don’t go far,” Finn calls from where he’s already retreated into the dining room.

“You know we won’t, you worry wart,” Sparrow replies, rolling her eyes.

Outside, we wander around the yard. Maggie runs ahead while we stop in front of a small garden tucked between the house and a shed. In between the dead leaves and the beginnings of new greenery sits a small tombstone. There are only a few words on it: *In memory of Andromeda.*

I stare at it for a moment, wondering if this is the woman Austin talked about—the one Finn lost. Or maybe it’s in memory of a pet or something since there’s no last name.

But when Sparrow sees it, her expression turns sad, and she shakes her head. “Poor girl.”

“Who was she?” I ask.

With a sigh, Sparrow stares down at the tombstone. “One of the only people Finn’s ever fully trusted. Or loved, for that matter, even if he tries to pretend he’s never loved anyone.”

“What happened?” Aubrey asks softly.

“I can’t say.” Sparrow shrugs. “Not my place. Only that not saving her is Finn’s biggest regret.”

His biggest regret. I turn away, watching Maggie as I try to shove down my panic.

What if this doesn’t work?

What if not saving them is my *biggest regret?*

“Shit. That was poor timing on my part.” Sparrow turns me around, clasps my shoulders, and stares into my eyes. “They’ll be fine, Wren. This is a

good plan.”

“As long as we can trust Axel,” I say unsteadily.

“You wouldn’t be standing here if we couldn’t,” she reminds me. She smiles, and the sun peeks out from behind the clouds, illuminating her face and making her deep brown skin glow. “You four have a whole team of people behind you. No more worrying, okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Meredith watching me. When I turn to look at her, her expression is oddly peaceful.

“From what Oliver has told me, I knew I’d like you, but you’ve surpassed all my expectations.” Meredith squeezes my shoulder reassuringly. “I’ve never seen someone as dedicated to them as you.”

“And you guys are going to kick Ludo’s ass,” Aubrey adds. “Otherwise, I still have to pretend to be his wife.”

I shudder at the thought, exaggerating it to make her laugh.

Since she supposedly got back from her honeymoon, Aubrey has posted a few photos of herself around Ludo’s mansion. They’re photos she took during their engagement for this specific purpose. It seems to be working, considering everyone keeps congratulating her in the comments.

“I’m ready to come face to face with this bastard,” Meredith says, her expression darkening. “He’s taken enough away from us. I’ll be damned if I let him hurt my son.”

It takes everything in me to keep my smile from wavering. I haven’t told her about what Elliot said—that Ludo already *has* hurt Oliver. At this point, it’d just make her worry more, and I’m depending on her confidence that we’ll make it out of this okay.

Clasping my hand in hers, Aubrey squeezes gently. “You’ll get your happily ever after, Wren. I know you will.”

I’ve never seen a love so deep. That’s what she said about me and the guys. We’re meant to be. Things *can’t* end here.

I squeeze her hand back and nod. With a glance at Meredith to steal some of her confidence, I square my shoulders. “We will.”

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Chapter Seventeen

Oliver

I’m sitting with my back pressed to the wall when my door flies open.

Last night, they took Elliot again, and when he came back, he sobbed for what felt like hours. There was a small, naive part of me that wanted to try sneaking in through his window, but I couldn’t work up the courage.

After I woke this morning, I tapped on the wall, and Elliot tapped back twice. I’m not sure what it means—an apology, maybe? That something is going to happen?

Now, my door opens, and panic rips through me as two men step into the room.

“No.” I scramble to my feet, backing into a corner. “No, not again, *please.”*

In the hallway, two more men pass by. They’re holding onto Elliot, who locks eyes with me for a split second before he’s pulled away.

I can’t do this. I can’t do it again.

I try to fight, but subsisting on one meal a day and more panic attacks than I can count doesn’t lead to a place of strength. They overpower me in

under a minute and handcuff my hands behind my back.

As they shove me into the hallway, I peer ahead, but Elliot is already out of sight. The air feels thinner, and my lungs burn as I'm forced downstairs. But this time, they don't take me to the basement.

I'm not sure if that's a good sign or a bad one.

Axel is waiting at the base of the stairs in the foyer. Just as I am, Elliot is handcuffed, and so is Rhett.

Rhett. He looks unharmed, but a deep frown is etched onto his features. Benny is standing next to him, and Andrew is hovering close by.

"Mr. Axel," Benny says, but Axel holds up his hand.

"Not now."

"Where are you taking them?" one of the men holding me asks, and Elliot tenses almost imperceptibly.

"That's above your pay grade." Opening the front door, Axel ushers Benny and Andrew outside. "Put them in the van."

Some of the men hesitate, giving Axel suspicious glances.

"Now," Axel snaps. "Unless you want me to tell Ludo that you disobeyed a direct order."

That gets the men moving. My throat feels like it's closing in on itself as they shove me out the door. Where are they taking us? What's Ludo's plan?

Outside, they throw us in the back of a white van. On Axel's orders, Andrew climbs in with us before shutting the doors. Axel gets behind the wheel up front, and Benny settles into the passenger seat.

I give Elliot a panicked look, but he doesn't return it. Rhett is watching Axel and Benny quietly, his muscles taut.

"Seatbelt, little man," Axel says as he starts the engine.

“Mr. Axel, why is my brother in handcuffs? And who are the other men?” Benny asks. He looks like he’s not sure whether he should be scared, angry, or both.

Axel tosses a key to Andrew. “Uncuff them.”

“What?” Andrew glances at us in disbelief. “Sir, they’ll—”

“Now,” Axel snaps, “and give me your phone.”

With a frown, Andrew reaches into his pocket and hands Axel his phone. Then he turns to us, key in hand.

I watch in silence as Andrew releases me, then Rhett, and then Elliot. Once he’s done, my hands itch to reach out to one of them, but I’m too scared to move.

“Oliver.” Elliot crawls toward me as the van jolts forward. He doesn’t even glance toward Axel or Andrew before pulling me into his arms.

“Ell, what—”

“It’s okay,” he tells me as he tightens his hold on me, squeezing me to an uncomfortable point. “We’re safe now.”

“What’s going on?” I grab onto his shirt, terrified he’ll move away. “I don’t—I don’t understand.”

Rhett is watching Elliot like he’s waiting for an answer, too. He’s placed himself in between everyone else and us, although Axel is driving, and Andrew looks more confused than anything else. I don’t think they’re about to do anything to us.

“Axel is helping us.” Elliot reaches for Rhett and grabs his hand, still not letting go of me. “We’re going home. We just have to do a couple things first.”

“Wait, is that true?” Andrew asks. He glances toward Axel. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to go home!” Benny says, his voice panicked. “Rhett, you told me I wouldn’t have to go back.”

“You won’t,” Rhett replies firmly. “You’re going to come live with me for a while. Remember when I told you about Elliot and Oliver?”

Benny nods, his gaze traveling over me and Ell. “That’s them?”

“It is,” Rhett says, “and I need to make sure they’re okay. I promise I’ll explain everything as soon as I can.”

Benny nods in understanding, still watching us.

“Are you both all right?” Rhett turns to us, ignoring the others for now. He still hasn’t let his guard down, but he gently lays his free hand on my shoulder. “There was one morning when you were both missing, and I . . .”

Elliot’s gaze flicks to Benny. “Later.”

My eyes slide closed as I lean into Elliot. It seems like he’s involved in whatever is happening, which eases my mind. I’ve always trusted his plans.

But I only get a short moment of peace before I’m wrenched from Elliot’s hold. For a split second, I panic, but then I realize the arms enveloping me in a vise grip are Rhett’s. He lets out a pained noise as he crushes me to his chest.

“Oliver,” he chokes out.

Burying my face in his neck, I throw my arms around him. Elliot’s arms slip around both of us, pressing us tightly together. Someone’s knee jabs into my thigh, right where I have a bruise from Ludo using the cattle prod on the same spot repeatedly. I hiss in pain, cringing away.

“Did I hurt you?” Rhett asks. He’s only let me pull back a few inches.

“It’s . . .” I readjust so my bruises are better protected, and then I brush my lips across his jawbone. “I’m okay.”

“I was so scared I lost you both,” Rhett whispers. He places a kiss to the top of my head. “Oliver. Ell. Oh my god.”

“We’re safe for now,” Elliot says. “But this is only half over. Sparrow is meeting us, and she’s taking Benny and Andrew to safety. Then we’re . . .” Elliot lowers his voice before continuing when he realizes that Benny is leaning closer to us and trying to listen in on our conversation. “Then we’re capturing Ludo.”

Dread fills me. *I just want to go home.*

“It’ll be quick and simple,” Elliot says. “I’ll explain in more detail soon.”

“What about Wren?” I ask.

“She’s safe,” Elliot replies. “I’m not sure how involved she is in the rest of this. She seems determined to help, though.”

“You’ve seen her?” Rhett’s tone carries a hint of relief—we’ve all been worried about her.

Elliot nods. “A couple days ago. She’s scared, but she’ll be all right. We’ll all be together soon.”

Nestled between Rhett and Elliot, I’m finally able to breathe easier. No one’s chasing after us because, quite simply, no one knows to—yet. Axel coming to our aid is the last thing I could’ve expected, but it’s perfect, because no one under his command should expect it, either.

I hope.

“How long?” I ask, not having to clarify what I mean.

“As long as everything goes according to plan?” Elliot smiles. “We should be with her in an hour.”

God. A few minutes ago, I was sitting alone in that room, waiting to die. Now, everything is happening at once.

We’ve escaped.

We’re turning the tables on Ludo.

We’ll get to see Wren again.

“And you’re sure we can trust him?” Rhett whispers, nodding toward the driver’s seat.

“He had the perfect opportunity to kidnap Wren, and he didn’t,” Elliot says quietly. “I say we watch our backs, but I think we’ll be okay.”

Rhett nods, brows furrowed.

“Benny,” Axel says, “did Ludo give you a phone?”

“He said I’m too young.” Benny rolls his eyes.

Not bothering to respond, Axel rolls down his window and tosses his and Andrew’s phones out the window.

“Hey!” Andrew shouts.

“We have to make sure Ludo has no way of tracking us,” Axel says, his voice flat and annoyed.

Andrew doesn’t have a response to that, so he just leans against the side of the van and crosses his arms.

“Rhett,” Elliot murmurs. He still has an arm around me, and he moves his free hand to brush his fingers across Rhett’s cheek.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Rhett’s voice is thick with emotion as he leans over and kisses Elliot. It only lasts for a few seconds before he leans back and tips my chin up. “And you, O.”

When his lips brush against mine, I fist his shirt tightly. I need to feel them both against me. How else am I supposed to get my brain to register that this is real? That this is happening?

One hour. One hour until I can have Wren in my arms again. One hour and this is over. Ludo will be in our hands instead of the other way around.

It doesn’t feel real.

It . . . it *can't* be real.

And just like that, my sense of calm shatters.

"Something's wrong." I'm barely able to force the words out. A chill sweeps over me. This feels too easy. It has to be a trap or . . . I don't know, *something.*

"Ol," Elliot says gently. He frames my face in his hands. "Do you trust me?"

"Always," I whisper.

"Then trust me on this." Elliot kisses me tenderly. "Nothing is going to happen to us. We're making it out alive."

"But—but what if—"

"Hey. Just focus on us, O." Rhett adjusts us so I have my back to his chest. He's leaning against the wall of the van with both his arms wrapped around me.

Elliot crawls in between our legs and takes my hands in his. I'm vaguely aware that both Benny and Andrew are staring at me, but my focus is tunneling, only aimed at one thing.

What if we don't make it?

"You know what we're gonna do when we get home?" Elliot asks me. His thumbs are rubbing against the backs of my hands, and he's leaning down so I have to look at him.

"W-what?"

He smiles, and my gaze locks onto it. I've missed that smile—the warmth in his eyes, the care that always shines in them. I *love* that smile.

"We'll buy as much ice cream as you want, and we're gonna have a night in. You can pick the movie. We can even switch who we're cuddling with halfway through like you always want."

Tears well up in my eyes. How many times did I wish for one more night with them? One last evening where we could all relax and cuddle and laugh at some stupid movie?

“And since it’s getting warmer, we can take Wren to the lookout you love so much.” Elliot is peppering my face with kisses now, doing his best to keep my mind occupied. “And maybe we can all go dancing. We haven’t done that in a while, have we?”

“Not since the ball,” I croak out. And that doesn’t fully count since we were really only there to make sure Maria wasn’t dating some asshole.

“And that pianist you like is coming to town soon,” Rhett says, nuzzling his face against my neck. “We don’t want to miss that.”

“I want—I want to do all those things.”

“We will,” Elliot tells me. “I promise, O.”

It doesn’t take long before Axel is pulling into a parking lot of a restaurant that closed down last year. He drives around back, to where there’s a dark gray sedan parked out of sight. Two women climb out as Axel parks next to it, and I recognize them immediately.

When Axel opens the door to the back of the van, I hop out. Seeing Sparrow makes sense, but Aubrey? She’s supposed to be in California.

“What’re you doing here?” I ask her as everyone else gets out.

“There’s no time to explain,” Axel says impatiently. “Benny, Andrew, these two are taking you someplace safe. The rest of us have to go. *Now.*”

“No!” Benny grabs onto Rhett. “You promised me we’d be a family.”

“We will be. We *are.* You’re going with Sparrow and Aubrey now, but I’ll join you both soon, okay?”

“But—”

“Ben,” Andrew says impatiently. “We don’t have time for this.”

“Hey. Listen to me.” Rhett crouches in front of Benny, placing his hands on his younger brother’s shoulders. “Remember all those moves I taught you? How long we practiced them?”

Benny nods, eyes wide.

“I need you to stay alert until we get back. You might have to use them. Protect these two with everything you’ve got, okay?”

Sparrow stifles a smile as she shares an amused glance with Aubrey. If it comes down to it, *she’ll* be the one doing the protecting, not Benny. I’m sure she thinks this is nothing short of adorable.

“Got it,” Benny says, rolling back his shoulders.

“Thank you. I’ll see you soon.” With that, Rhett backs away and climbs into the van. He waves to Benny as Axel slams the door shut.

“What’s the plan here?” I ask once Axel has started driving again. “How are we going to capture Ludo?” *And see Wren?*

Elliot takes one of my hands and one of Rhett’s. “Here’s how this is going to go.”

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Chapter Eighteen

Ludo

The sun is annoyingly bright as I step out of my vehicle and toss my keys to the valet. I hate this restaurant, but Raymond King owns it, and he likes to hold his meetings here. The only reason I put up with it is because I want him to think he has control over our dealings.

He's an arrogant bastard. Most in this business are. Neither him nor Burbank have an inkling of the money I've kept from them. I've covered my tracks perfectly, and they think they're powerful enough that I'd never even consider crossing them.

If I thought my hard drive was actually out there somewhere, I'd be worried, but I know it's not. I may have underestimated Aubrey, but there's no way she sold it. She wouldn't know who to give it to. No, I think Elliot, Rhett, and Oliver are hiding it somewhere. So for now, since they don't have access to it, it's safe—and by extension, so am I.

Elliot will break soon enough. I've let them sit in their fear for days. The next time I drag Oliver into the basement for another session, Elliot will spill everything before we even get started. *Especially* after last night.

I smile. Maybe I'll do that this afternoon once I'm home.

Inside the restaurant, I'm led to the private room in the back. King and Burbank are already seated at our table with the usual paperwork in front of them.

"Morning," I say, setting my briefcase on the table. "Ready to dive in?"

I've never been one for niceties or beating around the bush. We're here for business, not to chat or catch up. King and Burbank are usually the same way, but today, things seem to be different.

Fredrick glances at Raymond, who leisurely stands.

"The two of us received something this morning," King says. He's made his way to the door, which he opens. "Something . . . concerning."

Two men step inside. One I recognize as his right-hand man, and I assume the other is a low-level grunt.

Immediately, the hair stands up on the back of my neck. This isn't how our meetings go. No one else is ever in here with us.

Am I wrong? *Did* Aubrey sell the hard drive?

Leaning back in my chair, I maintain a relaxed composure. "Oh?"

"It came directly from Axel Holden," Fredrick says, "which was a surprise, to say the least."

Axel? Doubt fills my thoughts. Before the wedding, I was beginning to question his loyalties, but then he was right about Hayes and his partners.

But no. I purposefully kept him out of these dealings in case I was wrong about him. He doesn't know. How could he? Unless . . .

Burbank slides a small stack of papers across the table. As I look them over, my stomach sinks.

"Axel sent you these?"

King nods, and I realize his men are standing on either side of me. For a brief second, I contemplate reaching for my weapon, but I'm outnumbered and alone. It'd be pointless.

"He did," Burbank replies. "Honestly, Holloway, I thought you were smart enough not to share your secrets."

I swallow audibly.

"You've cheated us out of hundreds of thousands of dollars each." King is watching me with a hard, intense stare. "You owe us."

I've always prided myself in being able to get out of any tough spot I've found myself in. Years ago, when I was still an enforcer, I was known for my ability to slip in and out of places without notice. Getting caught can lead to disaster. I was only ever seen once—by a little girl, no less—and I dealt with her easily.

This is no different. Just another complication to rectify. And King just gave me an out.

Spreading my hands, I put on an easy smile. "Well, what can I say? You caught me. Only one thing to do now. I can write you both a check, and then—"

"No." Burbank's voice is hard, and his arms are crossed. "I'm not giving you another chance to play more games. I want cash, and I want it now."

"In full," King adds, "with interest."

I clench my jaw. That'll set me back months in my plan, if not a whole year. But it gets me out of here alive. I started from nothing. I can work my way back to where I am now. It'll just be a minor setback.

"Of course," I say tightly. "We'll have to make a few stops."

For years now, I've rented a number of storage units to act as reserves. Only Axel and I know about them, so if he's betrayed me, I need to get the

money out of there as quickly as possible. That cash is also untraceable, which I know is what King and Burbank want anyway.

"Give up your weapon," King's right-hand man says.

Slowly, I do. I'll get it back when this is over. It's not like they'll kill me. My connections are too vast—it's why they wanted to deal with me in the first place.

"Search him," King tells his other man.

I clench my fists as he pats me down. Usually, this treatment is for others, not me.

"Don't try anything," Burbank says darkly as he stands. "We're getting our money, and then you're done."

"Done, huh?" With a smile, I let King's men grab onto me. "I think we all know you need me, Burbank. Even while I was skimming off the top, I was the best option for you."

They exchange a loaded glance, but I'm not sure what it means. Before I have a chance to ask, I'm being led out the back entrance of the restaurant and shoved into the backseat of an SUV.

No big deal, I tell myself. *Once they have their money, they'll come around.*

. . .

By the time we arrive at the first storage facility, I've already come up with a new deal that Burbank and King will fall for in a heartbeat. They're angry now, but that'll change soon. We'll have to go to multiple of my storage units to get enough money to pay them back, but it'll only take a

couple hours. That's plenty of time for me to slowly worm my way back onto their good side.

They wouldn't be where they are without me. Sure, I stole from them, but they still made much more than they would've if they'd gone into business with someone else.

I hop out the vehicle and stroll up to the door as if King's men don't have their hands on their guns.

"Open it," Burbank snaps when I take my time with the padlock.

Once it's undone, I lift the door and shove it open all the way. Immediately, my throat goes dry. It's . . . empty. Even the bins that I had everything stored in are gone.

"I told you," Burbank growls. "No tricks."

For the first time all day, my confidence wavers. If this one is empty, odds are, Axel has already emptied out the rest. Who knows what else he's done? My men are used to taking orders from him, not me. He could've turned them against me.

He could've set Hayes and his partners free.

"The next one," I say, barely managing to keep my voice free of worry. "Maybe the next one."

Again, King and Burbank exchange a look.

"It should've been here," I tell them. "Axel must've taken the cash. We just need to get to the other units before he does."

That has to be it. He knows I always go to them in a particular order. It's not like he's had time to empty them out, which means he must be doing it now. All we have to do is cut him off—start from the last unit and go from there.

"If you're playing us—"

“You’ll get your money one way or another. But if you want it today, we have to move.”

“One more chance,” King says, “and if you’re lying again, we’re doubling the interest.”

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Chapter Nineteen

Rhett

Leaving my brothers behind feels wrong, but I know they'll be safer with Sparrow. Axel drives us to the storage facility before parking the van out of sight. When Finn spots us, his body visibly relaxes. He's already inside Ludo's empty storage unit.

"You guys make it out without a hitch?" he asks.

"So far," Elliot says, "but this is far from over."

"Where's Wren?" Oliver glances around, but she's nowhere to be seen.

"Safe for the moment." Finn nods in the direction I'm assuming she's hiding. "She's our getaway driver. As soon as she hears gunshots, she'll be heading our way so we can get out of here as quickly as possible."

I nod as Finn hands all of us guns. After we dropped off the boys, Elliot and Axel outlined our plan. Ludo will be here soon with two guys named King and Burbank along with at least two of their men.

Axel and Finn will be on the roof across from Holloway's storage unit with sniper rifles, and they'll take out the grunts. Me, Ell, and O will be in

the storage unit, and we'll take out King and Burbank right after. Holloway will be left on his own with nowhere to go.

From there, we all get the hell out of here and bring Ludo with us.

Should be simple, but that's if we can trust Axel. I'm still waiting for him to turn on us.

"I don't know how much time we have," Axel says, "so we all need to get into position and stay out of sight."

"I'll lock you guys in." Finn reaches for the overhead door once the three of us are inside. "Just stay ready and listen for footsteps."

My heart is in my throat as he closes us in. Darkness envelops us, and I feel someone take my hand.

"I love you both," Oliver whispers.

"We love you, too," Elliot says quietly.

I squeeze Oliver's hand. All I want to do is wrap him up in my arms and kiss him until he forgets to be anxious. We can't let go yet, though. Not until we're all safe.

Soon, I remind myself. *Soon you can be with all of them without having to worry.*

It's not long before we hear voices outside. Metal clangs against metal—the padlock against the door, I assume.

"This one had better not be empty, too," a deep voice grits out.

My grip on my gun tightens, my aim trained at the door. I can't see Ell and Oliver, but I know they're doing the same.

The door begins to open. Once it's mostly up, two shots ring out, and two men fall to the ground. We waste no time taking out the other two men we don't recognize.

"Don't move," Elliot shouts to Ludo, but he's already bolting.

Fuck.

We all chase after him, but I pull ahead of Elliot and Oliver.

There’s no way I’m letting him get away.

Especially since he’s headed straight for Wren.

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Chapter Twenty

Wren

The second we hear gunshots, I throw the SUV into drive and hit the gas. Meredith and I were hiding around the next row of storage units, completely out of sight but not too far away.

Someone shouts—Elliot, I think. There's more yelling as I round the building and slow to turn into the row where the guys are waiting. But a blur of red dashes out in front of me and heads down the main road.

I'd recognize that jacket anywhere.

Ludo.

I glance down to where the guys are and glimpse Rhett aiming his gun my way. When he sees I'm in his line of fire, he lowers it immediately and starts chasing after Holloway again.

Ludo is already past the next row of storage units. Looks like he's headed for the entrance.

"What're you doing?" Meredith yells when I accelerate, following Ludo instead of turning like I'm supposed to. "We have to get the guys!"

"That's Ludo," I tell her. "We can't let him get away."

We’re catching up to Ludo fast, but he realizes it too late. He risks a glance behind him right before the SUV rams into him. I slam on the brakes as Ludo flies forward and lands on the pavement a few feet in front of the vehicle.

Before I even have the car in park, Meredith is flying out the door, gun in hand. She rounds the vehicle, aiming her weapon at Ludo.

“You’re not going anywhere, you son of a bitch.” She kicks him, and I hear a loud, strained groan.

Rhett flies past the driver’s side, quickly followed by Elliot. Oliver is next, but instead of joining them, he yanks open my car door and pulls me out.

“Princess.” His arms clamp around me, and he lets out a relieved sound. “Oh my god, Wren.”

“Not now,” Finn snaps as he runs past us. “Wren, get back in the driver’s seat. Oliver, get in the back.”

Before he lets me go, Oliver places a quick kiss on my forehead. Once I’m in the car, he closes my door and climbs into the back. The guys already have Ludo handcuffed, and they’re dragging him around the car when Meredith hops in the passenger seat.

Oliver makes a choked noise when he sees her. *“Mom?!”*

Meredith grins back at him. “What, you thought I’d realize you were missing and do nothing? Come on, Ollie. You know better than that.”

Realization settles over him, and Oliver’s eyes snap to mine. For the first time, I realize he might be pissed that I told her everything. I was so caught up in making sure Meredith didn’t make things worse that I forgot to think of how Oliver would feel.

But I don’t have time to dwell on that right now. Once everyone is in the car, I take off. Someone probably heard the gunshots and called the police by now.

“Security footage?” Elliot asks.

“Taken care of,” Finn replies.

“And Axel?”

“Meeting us later tonight.”

My grip on the steering wheel tightens as I pull out of the storage facility’s parking lot. “The boys?”

“Safely with Sparrow,” Rhett says. I can feel him watching me even though I know he’s also holding Ludo in case he tries something.

We get a mile down the road before we hear the sirens. No one seems to be following us, though. A couple cop cars whiz past us, going the opposite direction as we are. My blood pressure spikes, but we blend in with traffic just fine.

The whole drive, Ludo doesn’t say a word. At first it worries me, but then we hit a rough patch of road, and he groans. I wasn’t going super fast when I hit him, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he broke a couple ribs or maybe even fucked up his neck. He’s probably keeping quiet because he’s in pain.

He can’t hurt us now, I remind myself. *The guys have him.*

By the time we get to the farmhouse, my nerves are fried. I swear, I thought I saw red and blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror every ten seconds. There never were, though. We made it out.

“You guys head inside,” Finn says. “There’s food in the kitchen, and there are a couple spare rooms upstairs. I’ll handle Holloway and get him into the basement.”

“No.” Elliot’s voice holds no room for argument. He glances at me longingly before turning away. “Wren and Meredith can go, but the rest of us are helping you. We can’t afford to have something else go wrong.”

“Fair enough,” Finn says, although I think he’s a little insulted.

“I’m coming with you guys,” Meredith says. “I have a few things I’d like to say to that slimebag.”

“Great,” Finn grumbles.

“Sweetheart,” Rhett says, “can you keep Benny out of our path? I don’t want him to see Ludo like this. Not until I figure out how to explain everything.”

“Sure,” I tell him, my stomach flipping when I hear the word *sweetheart.* I’ve missed him calling me that.

As I slip out of the vehicle and head into the house, everything in me is screaming to stay with them. I want to be as close to the guys as I possibly can be, but I’m not foolish enough to think I’ll get that immediately. We still have work to do, and they need to rest. We all do.

Soon, I remind myself.

Inside, Benny is watching a movie in the living room, which is far out of sight of the garage and basement doors. Andrew is pacing around the room, while Aubrey and Sparrow are seated on the couch having a whispered conversation.

When Andrew spots me, he stops. “Everyone’s back?”

Aubrey and Sparrow look my way, their expressions filled with relief.

“Yeah,” I say. “They’ll be in soon.”

Immediately, Benny springs up and dashes for the garage. I catch him before he makes it out of the living room.

“Can you stay in here for a couple minutes?” I ask. I feel odd requesting something of him when he has no clue who I am.

“But Rhett—”

“He’s okay,” I tell him. “But he asked me to make sure you stay in here. He’ll come find us as soon as he can, okay?”

He frowns. “Why should I listen to you?”

“Benny,” Andrew snaps. “You know better than to act like this.”

“He’ll only be a couple minutes,” I say.

Grabbing his little brother by the back of the neck, Andrew hauls him back into the living room. “Just wait.”

Once it seems like Benny is going to listen, Aubrey gets up and pulls me into a hug. She’s wearing a light pink sweater that brings out the warmth in her dark brown skin. When she looks at me, her eyes soften, although the concern that’s been present for the past few days has eased some.

“Are they okay?” she asks quietly.

“I think. I barely got to talk to them, which I know will change soon, but . . .” With an anxious sigh, I glance toward the doorway. “God, Aubrey, what if they blame me?”

“They won’t,” she tells me gently.

Wringing my hands, I nod. “It’s just my anxiety,” I mumble.

“Hey, I get it. You’ve all had me worried, too. But I’ve seen how they look at you, Wren. They aren’t going to let some little mistake get in the way of that.”

Deep down, I know that even if the guys do blame me, it won’t change how they feel. Aubrey is right—they could never hate me.

“Do you know if they killed King?” Aubrey asks hopefully.

“I’m not sure. Things got a little hectic.”

“We’ll ask once they’re in here,” Sparrow says smoothly, and we both glance over, realizing she’s been listening in on our whole conversation. “If they didn’t, they’ll hold up their end of the deal and find another way to keep your parents safe.”

Aubrey nods. “I know. This would just make it so much easier.”

With a groan, Benny flops onto the floor. “Where *are* they?”

I peer out the doorway and into the rest of the house. I think I heard them come inside. “I don’t know. But I’m sure it’ll only be a couple more minutes.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

Oliver

We gag Ludo with duct tape and drag him inside. He's not putting up much of a fight. I'm not sure if it's because of his injuries—I wouldn't be surprised if he has a concussion—or if he's trying to fake weakness so we go easy on him.

That'll never happen.

The basement is dark and damp. Finn yanks open a metal door that looks newer than the rest of the house. Inside is what was once probably a cellar.

"Throw him in here," Finn says. "We can chain him up."

Finally, Holloway makes some noise of protest, but we ignore him. Rhett and Elliot shove Ludo into the cellar while I hold up a flashlight so they can see. There are chains attached to hooks that are embedded to the wall, and Finn gets to work restraining Ludo with them.

I don't feel a shred of pity for locking him up in a dark, windowless room. He deserves far worse.

Once Finn has shut the door and turned all three locks on it, his gaze falls to us. "I need you three as alert as possible for our meeting with Axel

tonight. Eat. Shower. Rest. We're meeting him just after midnight."

"Food sounds amazing," I say tiredly. "One meal a day wasn't nearly enough."

Elliot's gaze snaps to mine. "*What?* You only got one meal a day?"

"You got more?" I ask.

"I did," Elliot says, guilt washing over his features.

It makes sense. We both heard Ludo say it—he needed Ell in perfect condition, not me.

"So did I," Rhett says. "I ate with Benny."

Something passes between Elliot and Rhett as they share a long, heavy look.

"Let's get upstairs," Finn says quietly.

"I'll be a minute," Meredith replies. She's been eyeing the door since Finn locked it.

"He's not worth your energy." I tug her toward the stairs, but she doesn't budge.

"Oh, my sweet boy." Mom grabs my face and presses a kiss to my forehead. "I'm glad you're safe. Now go upstairs and let me do this, okay?"

"You're not going to kill him, are you?" I ask.

Mom's gaze flicks to Rhett. "No. I know that's not my place."

"And keep him quiet," Finn says as he tosses Mom the keys to the door. "Benny doesn't know he's down here, and I'd prefer not to have a traumatized twelve-year-old to deal with for the rest of the day."

Once we're upstairs, Finn moves toward the sound of a TV, and I figure that's where everyone else is. He's probably trying to give us a few minutes alone, which I appreciate.

But when I turn to Rhett, he doesn't pull me into my arms or kiss me. He just grabs me and drags me into the kitchen. Elliot follows, avoiding my gaze.

I really should've kept the one meal a day thing to myself. He has enough guilt to deal with.

"Hey," I protest when Rhett turns away from me and opens the fridge.

"You need to eat," he says, grabbing food and tossing it onto the counter.

"I can wait a couple minutes."

"No, you need food."

Gently, Elliot places a hand on his shoulder. "Rhett. He needs *you.*"

"I need both of you," I snap. "So get out of your goddamn heads and get over here. I didn't think I'd ever see either of you again. I don't care about a fucking sandwich."

That seems to snap both of them out of whatever's gotten into them. Rhett drops the bread he just pulled from a bag, and Elliot finally looks me in the eye.

"Now," I grit out.

I don't wait for them to move toward me. I've waited long enough, dammit, and every second I'm not in their embrace is more painful than the last. So I grab them both, kissing Elliot and then Rhett, before pulling them as close as I can.

Elliot releases a long, shuddering breath as his arms come around me and Rhett. I feel his lips pressed to the top of my head, and I close my eyes as Rhett makes a pained sound.

We don't say anything. No amount of telling each other that we were scared, that we missed each other, that we thought we'd die, will amount to the way the tightness in my chest eases at being held by them.

Their bodies are familiar against mine, and I let myself relax. Holloway is locked up. We're all safe. The revenge we've been fighting for is finally at our fingertips, and this time, we're not letting it slip away.

"I'm so sorry," Elliot whispers after a few minutes. "For everything. And Ol, I should've stayed awake. I should've left. I'm so, so sorry."

Just like that, it feels like someone is squeezing my lungs and forcing the air out of them.

"It's okay," I mutter. "It wasn't your fault."

"What happened?" Rhett asks cautiously, like he's scared to know the answer. "The morning the two of you weren't in your windows, where were you?"

Goddammit. I was hoping they'd drop it.

"Not now," I whisper.

"No. What happened?" Rhett's arms tighten around me, but the comfort that normally comes with his embrace is gone. "You were in pain earlier in the van. What did he do to you?"

It's too much. Too restrictive. The pain, the way Ludo smiled at my screams, Elliot's pleading—it all forces its way to the front of my mind.

"I snuck into his room," Elliot starts. "I wasn't supposed to fall asleep, but __"

"Stop." I shove them both away from me. "Just stop. I . . . I can't."

My brain has blocked out a lot of the torture, but I still remember enough.

I wish I didn't.

"Ol." Elliot reaches for me, but I swat his hand away and back up frantically.

"I don't want to talk about it." My voice is too loud, my tone too harsh. "I said not now."

“Okay.” Elliot lowers his arm. “We don’t have to. I’m sorry.”

Rhett’s features are hardened, and he hasn’t taken his eyes off me. Of course he has questions, but I just *can’t.* I never want to think about it again—including right now.

“Where’s Wren?” I turn toward the doorway, feeling unsteady on my feet. My hands are shaking.

“You need to eat,” Rhett says, but he doesn’t move to stop me as I head toward the living room.

The TV is going, but no one is paying attention to it. Andrew is plopped in a chair, Sparrow and Finn are sitting on the couch, and Aubrey is holding Wren and stroking her back.

Benny is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, although when he sees me, he straightens. “Can I see Rhett now?” he asks.

“He’s busy,” I say, stumbling into Wren’s arms. “He’ll be in here in a couple minutes.”

Without a doubt, Rhett is probably halfway through making my sandwich. A few minutes ago, I was starving, but now eating is the last thing I want to do. I’ll have to, though. Rhett is worried enough about me.

Inhaling deeply, I bury my face in Wren’s neck. Her arms come around me hesitantly.

“I missed you,” I whisper. She knows it, but I need to fill this silence. Need *something.*

“O, what’s wro—”

“Why’s Aubrey here?” I turn to face the room, keeping an arm around Wren. “I mean, I’m happy to see you and all. But . . . aren’t you supposed to be in California?”

“Wren needed some support,” Aubrey says softly. Her eyes are tracking my every movement with an odd amount of concern.

“That’s nice.” Plastering on a smile, I kiss Wren on the cheek. “I’m glad you have her. And my mom, apparently. What’s up with that?”

Wren’s brows are furrowed, but at the mention of Mom, her frown turns into a look of guilt. “She showed up at the house when you didn’t answer any of her calls. We were afraid she’d go to the police unless she had a reason not to, so I told her everything.” She grimaces. “I’m sorry.”

Everything? Based on the look in her eyes when we left her in the basement, she most *definitely* didn’t take this *well*.

“That’s a lot,” I say.

“She took it well for the most part. Where . . .” Wren peers behind me. “Where is she?”

“Uh . . . busy.”

Wren seems to get the idea because she nods slowly. “And you’re—”

“I’m fine,” I say quickly. I don’t have to look around the room to know that no one believes me. “Just talk to me,” I add quietly.

Even though Wren’s worry is evident on her face, she does what I ask. “I, um. I met Maggie. She’s outside right now.”

“Yeah? Play fetch with her yet?”

Wren laughs. “Practically every day. She can’t get enough of it. Meredith has enjoyed playing with her, too.”

“That’s . . . good.” But my voice is steeped in disappointment. It’s only now hitting me that Wren and Mom have met. They’ve talked. Hell, it looks like they’ve spent at least a couple days together.

“Oliver,” Wren says hesitantly.

“I’m glad you met Mom,” I say, swallowing down the lump in my throat. “I’m . . .”

I’m tired of happy moments being taken away from me.

“Rhett!” Benny shouts. He bolts across the room and throws his arms around his older brother, nearly knocking the plate out of his hand. “You’re okay!”

“Yeah,” Rhett says as he pats Benny on the back with his free hand. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Were you really not a guest?” Benny asks, pulling away. “Were you a prisoner? Why were you a prisoner? What did Mr. Holloway want with you? Why were you in handcuffs?”

“I’ll explain soon,” Rhett says, “but for right now, I have some stuff I have to do. Tomorrow, all right?”

“As long as you promise.”

The corner of Rhett’s mouth tips up. “I promise. But right now, I have some catching up to do.”

Sparrow stands. “We can give you all some privacy.”

Benny’s face falls. “What? No!”

“They all need to sleep.” Finn places a hand on Benny’s shoulder. “How does playing with Maggie for a bit sound?”

“Sure,” Benny says, but he’s still looking at Rhett. “You’re not leaving me again? And I don’t have to go back to my dad’s house?”

“Not leaving, and you never have to see Richard again if you don’t want to,” Rhett tells him.

At that, Benny looks a little conflicted, but he nods. Once everyone has cleared out of the living room, Rhett holds out the plate to me. I grab it and

reluctantly take a couple bites. He watches me for a minute before turning to Wren.

“Sweetheart.” In a single step, he’s right in front of her, sweeping her into his arms and kissing her.

She grabs onto him, her grip tight. When he pulls away, she doesn’t let him get far. “Are you okay?” Her gaze moves to Elliot, and then to me. “Are . . . are all of you okay?”

“We’re fine, princess,” I say, even though the little food I’ve managed to swallow is threatening to make a reappearance.

“Are *you* okay?” Rhett asks her. “What happened after we got captured?”

“Ludo sent a team,” she says. “Finn and I fought them off. Well, we killed two of them, and we got some information out of the third before I killed him, too.”

My jaw drops as Rhett’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“You . . . you *killed* a man?” Elliot asks, his voice a mix of the same wonder and disappointment that I’m feeling.

“Two,” Wren admits almost bashfully. “Finn told me exactly what to do for the first guy, and the second one was restrained.”

“Yeah, but you killed them.” Elliot’s shoulders sag.

Glancing between us, Wren nods. “That bothers you?”

“No, I just . . .” Rubbing at the back of his neck, Elliot lets out a heavy breath. “I guess I just thought that if it happened, we’d be there to see it.”

“Oh,” Wren says softly.

“We’re proud of you, princess.” Giving her my best smile, I set my plate down on the coffee table. I made it halfway through the sandwich, and there’s no way I can stomach more. “Just wish we could’ve seen it.”

She laughs then, and while it's tired, it's not hollow. "Words I never thought I'd hear from a romantic partner. Well, until a couple months ago." Resting her head on Rhett's chest, she adds, "I wouldn't want it any other way, though. And I'm glad we get to—that we're all . . . that we get to . . ."

At first, I think she's managed to push back the tears, but then her face scrunches up, and she buries her face in Rhett's chest. Both Elliot and I move in immediately, surrounding her while she clings to Rhett.

"I know it was scary," Rhett murmurs.

"I was *terrified,*" she sobs. "I kept asking myself what I'd do if you didn't make it. If I'd be able to . . ." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. Guys, I'm so sorry."

"What?" Rhett pulls back slightly, just enough that he can look at her, but she drops her gaze.

"Princess," I say softly. "What're you talking about?"

That only makes her cry harder. My heart sinks as I realize what she means. This whole time, she's been blaming herself.

"This . . ." Rhett shakes his head. "Wren, why are *you* sorry?"

"You don't think this was your fault, do you?" Elliot asks.

"Of course it was!"

"Wren." Grasping her shoulders, Rhett shakes his head. "Absolutely not. Just—*no.*"

"If I'd paid closer attention, then . . ." Another sob forces its way out. "None of this—none of this would've—"

"No," Rhett says quickly, his voice firm. "No, sweetheart, you couldn't've known. This wasn't your fault. Not in the slightest."

"But you were captured because I was seen. Because I—"

“You were seen because I pushed you into something you weren’t ready for yet,” I say. “It’s not your fault, princess. It’s mine.”

“What?” Elliot says. “*Yours?* I’m the one who should’ve suspected that it was all a trap. That—”

“Enough.” Rhett shakes his head, his arms tightening around Wren so he’s crushing her into his chest. “The blame doesn’t lie with any of you. I’ve put us through so much pain over the past decade. This is just my latest fuck-up. I should’ve found a way to be content with just killing Holloway so we could’ve moved on years ago. This hasn’t been fair to anyone, and sweetheart . . .” Rhett’s lips brush against her forehead. “This was no one’s fault but mine.”

“You’re all fucking idiots,” Finn mutters.

I jump, whirling around to find him standing in the doorway.

“Haven’t been here for the whole conversation,” he says, holding up his hands. “Just long enough to hear all your bullshit. *None* of you are to blame.”

Elliot goes to protest, but he doesn’t get a chance.

“This lies solely on Ludo’s shoulders,” Finn continues. “Deep down, I *know* you all know that. *He’s* the one who’s inflicted all this suffering on you, so stop trying to take the blame for something that’s not your fault.” He’s speaking to all of us, but he’s only looking at Rhett.

We all know he never truly stopped blaming himself for Sammy’s death.

“Now please don’t make me haul each of you upstairs,” Finn says. “You three need to sleep. Fuck, Wren does, too. Just look at her. I’ll keep Benny and Andrew occupied, and I’ll make sure Meredith doesn’t hurt Ludo *too* much. So get moving.”

I sigh. Even though I've barely done anything for the past two weeks, I was never able to sleep well. How could I have? I was terrified.

Wren's hand slides into Rhett's. "I can show you guys upstairs."

Quietly, I follow everyone out of the living room. As I pass Finn, he places a hand on my shoulder.

"Wren has your meds. She grabbed them the night we left. She's probably too overwhelmed to remember."

"Thanks."

Upstairs, there are three spare rooms. Sparrow and Aubrey are staying in one, Wren has been sleeping in the other, and the third is empty. We all shower, and I brush my teeth, needing to get the taste of food out of my mouth. When I get out of the bathroom, everyone is sitting on Wren's bed.

I join them, leaning up against Elliot. There's no way we can all fit on one of these beds, but none of us want to leave each other.

Rhett clears his throat. "The three of you could—"

"No," I say, not even letting him finish. "You're not sleeping alone."

"I doubt I'll get much rest. There's no reason—"

"No," we all say at once.

"So we split up?" Wren asks sadly.

"It's our best option if we want to get good sleep," Elliot says. "Ol, will you . . . I . . ."

"I need you, too," I whisper. I need to wake up next to him without him being dragged away from me. The sooner I can replace that memory, the better.

Before we go, Rhett draws me into his arms. He cradles my head as he kisses me, and I lean into him. I need to be with Elliot, but I'll miss his body against mine.

“I’m sorry for earlier,” I murmur. “I shouldn’t’ve pushed you away.”

He brushes his nose against mine. “All I care about is that you’re okay.”

When I pull away, he’s watching me intently. All three of them are. Earlier, I was so desperate to get out of the memories of what Ludo did. I knew it scared them, but I couldn’t stop. “I’ll . . . I’ll be okay.”

Rhett nods, finally releasing me.

“I love you,” I tell him, wishing he’ll say it back but knowing he won’t. His mind is in a dark place, too. It’s written all over his face.

He brushes his lips against mine once more before turning to Elliot. As they embrace, I wrap Wren tightly in my arms.

“I don’t want to let you go,” she whispers.

“It’s just for a few hours,” I tell her, even though I feel the same way. “And nothing will ever tear us apart again. I promise.”

She sniffles and kisses me lightly.

“You have my meds?”

“Oh!” She spins around and opens the drawer to her nightstand. “Here. I completely forgot.”

“It’s okay, princess.” I brush my fingers over her cheek. “Sleep well.”

Elliot gives Wren a lingering kiss, and then we head into the other spare room. The bed is much more comfortable than the mattress I’ve been sleeping on, and I revel at the softness of the sheets and the feeling of having blankets over me again.

As Elliot pulls my body into his so he’s spooning me, I breathe a sigh of relief. His body is warm against mine, and I feel safer than I should, considering how close Ludo is.

But he’s in chains, separated by multiple floors and a door with three locks. Finn and Sparrow are looking out for us, and now that we have the

upper hand, there's no way we'll lose it again.

We'll be okay.

I roll over so I'm facing Elliot. He's watching me silently, and while he looks tired and ready to fall asleep, guilt still lingers in his eyes.

Gently, I trace his face with my fingertips. His skin is soft. Warm. Perfect.

"What're you doing?" Elliot whispers.

"Making sure this is real," I say softly.

When we were captured, it happened so quickly that it felt like a dream. Getting rescued was the same. I went from thinking I was about to get tortured again to realizing I was getting out in *seconds.* We're safe now—I know that. But there's still a part of me that doesn't *feel* it.

"It is," Elliot murmurs before fitting his mouth to mine. He kisses me slowly, almost lazily, because there's no rush now.

He doesn't have to sneak in through the window.

I don't have to live in fear of the footsteps outside my door.

We can talk to each other instead of tapping on walls.

"I love you," I breathe out, gripping his hair so he doesn't pull away. My lips move against his, and his hand travels up my back, keeping me close.

There are so many things we still need to catch up on, but for the moment, they all fall away. Our kiss eventually slows, and we lie there with our foreheads touching and our arms around each other.

This time, I don't worry about Elliot falling asleep. When his breathing slows, I find comfort in the sound. And when I find myself drifting off, anxiety doesn't wake me back up again.

Finally—*finally*—we're at peace.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Rhett

Per usual, I wake before everyone else. Wren is still sound asleep with her head on my shoulder and her hand on my chest. There's no way I can get up.

Not that I want to.

As I kiss the top of her head, I breathe deeply. She smells like a part of home that I haven't realized how much I've missed until right now.

I thought about her, Ell, and O every waking moment, and I never got used to the constant ache in my heart. But I didn't think about the little things—her smell, how her body fits against mine, or the way her face is completely relaxed while she sleeps.

The sun has set, and I'm able to raise my head just enough to see the clock. It's a little before ten, so we'll need to get up soon, or we'll be late to our meeting.

"Sweetheart," I whisper. I don't want to disturb her, but I want some time with her before we leave.

She moans softly. Her fingers curl around my shirt before she slowly lifts her head. “Hmmm?”

“It’s time to wake up.”

With a groan, she presses her face into my shoulder. Yet another thing I’ve missed—how cute she is when she’s waking up.

“You can stay asleep if you’d like,” I tell her softly, “but we’ll have to leave soon, and I was hoping for some time before we go.”

“I’d like that,” she mumbles.

Letting out an amused breath, I ask, “Sleep? Or time?”

“You,” she groans.

The two of us stay just like that for a few minutes while she wakes up. As my fingers run up and down her arm, she stretches out and kisses my cheek.

“I love you,” she whispers.

My eyes close. Every day, I thought about seeing her again, about finally telling her how I feel. I scolded myself for hesitating—*hated* myself for not making sure she knew. There’s no way I can wait any longer.

Slowly, I sit up, and Wren moves with me. She turns toward me and drapes her arms around my neck. I cradle her body against mine. God, I was so afraid I’d never see her again.

“Wren,” I murmur. “Wren, I . . .”

“It’s okay,” she tells me.

For a brief second, I think of my father. He’s not capable of this kind of gentleness—of this kind of care. At certain parts of my life, I was convinced I was the same way. The guys and Wren helped me to realize that’s not true.

“I need you to know,” I tell her. “I need you to know that I’ll always fight my way back to you. That I tried—that I never would’ve stopped trying.”

“I do know.” Her lips brush against mine, the barest hint of a kiss. “I promise I know. But I don’t want you to tell me.”

Gently, she detaches herself from me and stands. She turns on the lamp, illuminating the room in a soft glow, before pulling me into the bathroom. We both brush our teeth, and she showers since she was too tired to earlier.

While I’m waiting for her to finish, I lower myself onto the bed. I have to tell her. I *want* to tell her—promised myself I would.

Not until you can say it without it making you uncomfortable, she told me. *Without it making you think of him.*

Can I do that?

Dammit. I want to be ready. I think I might be, but I don’t want to betray her trust. *Why* do I have to be so hardened? So closed off? Why does this come so much easier to the others?

Frustrated, I rub my face. The guys have told me time and time again that I’ve come so far. I know I have, but it’s not enough. They all deserve better. And now, I have two brothers in the picture—one who looks up to me way too much, and one who I’ve threatened to kill more times than I’d like to admit.

They need someone to watch out for them. They need an example of how to live that isn’t tainted by Richard. I’ll always have some of him in me, but I’ve done my best to purge him from my system. And I’ll never fucking stop.

When Wren comes out of the bathroom, she’s wrapped up in a towel. Her hair is up since she said she washed it yesterday, so when she turns toward the dresser, my heart stops. There, on the back of her neck, is the same butterfly I have on my hand.

“Wren,” I say breathlessly. “Your . . . your neck.”

“Hmm? Oh.” She grabs a shirt from a drawer before moving toward me. “I didn’t want to wait. I was afraid we’d never . . .” She winces, not finishing her sentence, but she doesn’t have to.

“I’m glad you got it.”

“It helped me feel closer to you.” Her eyes turn glassy, and she blinks rapidly. “I know it’s stupid, but—”

“It’s not.” I pull her down until she’s straddling me. The towel slips, revealing her thighs, and the top loosens some, too. “It’s anything but that. I would’ve done the same.”

Sighing, she rests her forehead against mine. Her fingers run along my shoulders and down my arms. Her touch is something I’ll savor a little more now.

“I like it,” I tell her, “and I’m glad you got it.”

With a small smile, she fits her mouth to mine. Sadness still lingers in her eyes, sadness I know only time will erase.

I pull her into me and deepen the kiss. We’re free now, and nothing is getting in between us again, but I want to ease her pain. I want her happy and smiling. I want her eyes sparkling with joy. I want her laughing.

Just say it. It’ll give her something good to focus on.

I pull away. “Sweetheart. I . . .”

She waits, searching my face, her head slightly tilted.

My heart is racing, and my hands tighten on her hips. She needs this. We *both* need this. Not just so she hears me say the words, but so I can prove to myself that Richard isn’t controlling my life anymore.

“I promise I know,” she tells me softly, “but if you need a way to tell me . . . then show me.”

“Show you?”

She nods, leaning in close enough that our lips are just barely brushing. “Show me I’m yours.”

My fingers trail over her upper thigh. The heart I carved there has healed, just as it should’ve. It was as shallow of a cut as I could manage. I wasn’t about to leave a scar on her without discussing it more deeply beforehand. I’ve only ever done that with Oliver, and it was years into our relationship before I did.

“And show me you’re mine,” Wren whispers.

“Always,” I murmur. Pressing my lips to hers, I just barely slip my hands underneath her towel. Her skin is so soft, her moans so sweet. Few things compare to the bliss of having her under my hands.

Wren pushes the towel to the floor, leaving her completely exposed to me. Instantly, I lean her backward, keeping one hand between her shoulder blades so she doesn’t fall. I lean down, sucking on one of her nipples and flicking it with my tongue.

“Rhett,” she gasps. “Oh, fuck.”

I move to her other breast, groaning when she grinds against my hardening cock. This wasn’t how I was planning on spending the little time we have together, but maybe it’s what we need—to feel close when words are just out of my reach.

I’m almost there, sweetheart. I promise.

Scooping Wren into my arms, I stand and throw her onto the bed. I’m on her in seconds, kissing her and sliding my tongue into her mouth. She locks her ankles behind my back and pulls my body flush against hers.

I’m not as rough as I usually am with her. This time, I won’t deprive her. Won’t degrade her. This is different.

“Wren,” I breathe when I pull away.

Our eyes lock for a brief moment before I dip my head down and kiss her neck. She arches into me, giving me better access, and I lightly suck on the skin at the base of her throat. It's not hard enough to bruise, but it makes her moan.

"Mine." I kiss her collarbone. "Mine." In between her breasts. "Mine." Her stomach. There's a pause as I push her legs apart and glance up to find her watching me with parted lips. *"Mine."*

When I spread her arousal to her clit with my tongue, she moans, and when I suck on it, she gasps. She knows she has to be quiet, and I know she's capable of it.

"Rhett," she whispers, grabbing onto my hair. She tugs hard and rolls her hips.

Fuck yes. I wrap my arms around her thighs to keep her against me and circle her clit with my tongue. God, I want to bury myself as deep inside her as I can, but I want to make sure she's ready first.

The harder she pulls on my hair, the harder I suck on her clit. I fall right into what she likes. We don't have to rush, but we don't have an abundance of time, either.

As she gets more worked up, she starts moving against my face. Both her hands are clamped over her mouth now so she can try to keep her moans as contained as possible. Pride swirls through me. Even if we have to be quiet, I love that she's struggling to keep it down.

The only warning I get that she's coming is when she grabs a pillow and screams into it. Her back arches, and she bucks against my face. Her cries turn into whimpers as I lightly lick her clit. By the time she's propping herself up on her elbows, she's shaking and warm to the touch.

"Come here," she says breathlessly.

I crawl on top of her and take her face between my hands. When I kiss her, her tongue slides against mine, and she moans. She tugs my shirt up my body with an urgency that has nothing to do with the fact that I have to leave soon. I shed the rest of my clothes quickly before settling in between her legs.

As I stroke my dick, I take her in. She's panting, her lips are slightly swollen from kissing, and her eyes are locked on my hand's movements.

I'm tempted to make her beg, but tonight is for showing her everything I can't say. If one of us ends up begging, it'll be me.

Slowly, I slide into her. My thumb finds Wren's clit, and her eyes roll back into her head. I stay upright, fucking her with long, deep thrusts. As I do, I circle her clit gently.

"Oh my god," she groans. She props herself up on her elbows so she can watch as I slide in and out of her. "Rhett, fuck."

"Look how well you take me. It's just like Ell said. We were made for each other."

"We . . . we were," she breathes out. She reaches out, her fingers lightly tracing down my chest and stomach. Her voice is thick with emotion as she says, "God, Rhett, I love you."

Leaning down, I fuse my mouth to hers. She whimpers and grabs onto my arm as I press deeper into her.

"Harder," she pants. "Please."

Straightening again, I press tight circles to her clit and drive into her. Her eyes widen, and she comes again, throwing her head back.

I grab her throat. "Look at me, Wren."

Her eyes snap to mine. She's biting her lip, trying to stay quiet. Considering I haven't let up, I'm not making it easy on her. She starts

squirming, and her gaze drops to where my thumb is still rubbing her clit.

"Up here, sweetheart."

"It's too much. Rhett, I—*ohhh,*" she groans in relief when I let up.

"Look. at. me."

She obeys, staring up at me with a dazed smile. When I lean over her, squeezing the sides of her neck, she opens her mouth, and I spit onto her tongue.

"Good girl," I murmur, watching her swallow it before pushing her flat onto her back.

Her eyes slide closed, and she clings to me as I thrust into her. My forehead drops to hers, and I let myself close my eyes, too.

"Rhett," she moans. "Rhett, oh my god."

She feels so goddamn good. I'm not sure there's anything that could make this better.

"I want to be on top," she tells me. "Please?"

Fuck, I was wrong.

I slide into her one last time, capturing her mouth in a heated kiss before pulling out all the way. We switch so I'm on my back in the middle of the bed, and I run my hands over her thighs as she climbs on top of me.

Wren lowers herself onto my cock slowly. Her head drops back as she takes every inch of me beautifully. Watching her almost feels as good as being inside her.

"God," she chokes out as she sits there for a second. Leaning forward, she places her hands on my shoulders and rolls her hips.

I thrust up into her, and satisfaction blooms in my chest at her breathless moan. We all fell so fast that I'm still not used to having her, but at the same

time, her reactions feel so familiar. I crave them, just as I crave her. I'll never get enough. How could I?

"Take my hands," I tell her, and when she does, I intertwine our fingers. "Now ride me. I'm yours just as much as you're mine, so take all of me."

With her eyes locked on mine, she does just that. Her body moves in the most perfect ways as she fucks me slowly at first, and then faster. Within minutes, she's panting, and a light sheen of sweat covers her forehead.

"All yours," I tell her. "And that's never changing."

"Mine," she whispers.

Nodding, I smile. "That's right, sweetheart."

Someone knocks on the door, and Wren freezes. "Was I too loud?" she whispers.

"Who is it?" I call.

"Just us," comes Elliot's voice. "Can we come in?"

"Uh . . ." I glance up at Wren questioningly.

"Is anyone else in the hallway?" she asks.

"Not at the moment," Oliver says.

"Then come in," she replies, "and shut the door quickly."

They do, their eyes locking on us as Oliver closes the door. Both of them are dressed and ready to head out. Elliot looks pleasantly surprised at what we're doing, and Oliver is smirking like this is *exactly* what he expected of us.

"Don't stop, love," Elliot says. "Keep going."

As they come closer, Wren begins moving again. Our hands are still intertwined, and her fingers tighten around mine as she rolls her hips. Elliot is staring at the back of Wren's neck, and he nudges Oliver and nods to the tattoo. It makes him smile.

“Ell,” Wren moans. “O, come here.”

Their gazes fixed on her, they both climb onto the bed, one on either side of us. Elliot kisses his way up her neck while Oliver slips his hand in between her legs and plays with her clit.

Gasping, Wren moves faster. She bites her lip in an effort to stay quiet as Elliot gently pinches one of her nipples. An involuntary shudder rips through her body.

“Watch how pretty she looks taking your cock,” Oliver says to me. “God, princess. What a sight for sore eyes.”

“Oliver,” she groans.

He grips the hair at the base of her neck and pulls her toward him. Their lips meet in a hungry kiss, and I moan at the sight.

Elliot is watching too, his eyes dark with lust. He crawls closer and leans over me, our gazes locking. Neither of us speak a single word. Everything we need to say is exchanged in one long, ravenous look. Our love, how much we missed each other, the way he needs me and I need him—all of it.

“Rhett,” he murmurs before slamming his lips to mine. Gripping my hair tightly, he slips his tongue into my mouth. The kiss is messy and rough, exactly as I was hoping it would be.

I want to grab onto Ell, but I don’t want to let go of Wren’s hands. Even with the guys here, this is still about me and Wren—about showing her that I love her. That she’ll always own a piece of my heart.

When Elliot pulls back, I turn my gaze to Wren. Oliver is kissing her neck while still rubbing her clit. As she works up and down my cock, she smiles down at me.

There it is. This smile is real. Full. It’s the first moment any of us have had together that hasn’t been tainted by exhaustion, fear, or someone

interrupting us. Right now, we're just *us,* and our circumstances can be briefly ignored.

I'm getting close enough that I'm trying to keep myself from coming until Wren does. I want her to come again, but I'm not sure how much longer I can try to hold off the inevitable. She feels too goddamn good.

"Fuck," I groan when she tightens around me.

"Look at what you do to him, love."

Wren whimpers when Elliot leans down and sucks on one of her nipples. The sound does me in. My eyes slide shut as my orgasm washes over me and knocks the breath from my lungs.

"Oh god, Rhett," Wren moans. "I'm coming, I'm coming, ahhh—"

Her cry is swallowed up by Oliver slamming his lips to hers. As Wren's movements slow, Elliot straightens. He watches us both ride out the last waves of pleasure before he kisses Wren gently.

"Sweetheart," I murmur, releasing her hands and tugging her down.

Almost immediately, Wren's lips meet mine. She props herself up on her elbows and moans as I squeeze her ass. "I love you," she whispers.

The words almost tumble out of my mouth unbidden. Caught up in the emotions and the rush of having her close like this, it's easier to say. Almost natural. But when I tell her, I don't want it to be because I got swept away by a surge of chemicals. That's not fair to her.

So I kiss her again, my lips moving against hers with more meaning. She sighs into my mouth, a sweet sound, and I eat it up.

I *will* tell her. Soon—just not right now.

Once she's straightened, Elliot pulls her off me. He looks at me, not even having to tell me what he's thinking—I need to get ready to leave.

"What time are we heading out?" Wren asks.

I’m halfway off the bed, but now I freeze. I assumed Wren would be staying here. A single glance at Oliver and Elliot tells me they were thinking the same thing.

“Please don’t make me fight to come with you,” she adds tiredly. “I don’t want to get separated again.”

“It should be safe.” Elliot kisses her temple while he hugs her from behind. “I don’t want to leave you here, either.”

“You’re sure?” Oliver asks.

“Axel had plenty of chances to stab us in the back,” Elliot replies. “If he’s still planning on doing so, I don’t think it’ll involve hurting us physically.”

“The hard drive,” I say as I pull my clothes on. “It’s someplace secure?”

Wren nods. “Finn has it in his safe, and he has two backups hidden.”

Even with Holloway locked up, the hard drive has many uses. We still need it, but we’re not the only one who does.

“Depending on how badly Axel wants the drive, things *could* get physical,” I say.

Wren bristles, and I can already hear the dozen arguments she has prepared. She fought like hell to get us back, and she’s not about to let us go again.

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t come,” I add quickly, “Just that we should be careful.”

“I think if Axel asks for the drive, we should give him one of the copies,” Oliver says. “It eliminates any potential fight over it, and it’ll help him out, I’m sure.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Elliot says. “Axel has already expressed he wants the drive to reveal Ludo’s secrets, and it fits with our plan as well.

We'll have to convince Finn, though. He still doesn't like the idea of trusting Axel."

"Do we?" Wren asks. "Trust him, I mean."

"I think we can," Elliot says slowly, "but it's hard to say for sure without knowing his full motives. He's saying that he wants out, and as long as he's telling the truth *and* we uphold our end of the deal, I can't think of a reason for him to turn on us."

"But we think he is telling the truth, right?" Wren asks, glancing between us.

My mind goes back to how desperate Axel sounded when he told me he was going to help us. "I believe him."

"So do I," Elliot says.

Oliver shrugs. "That's good enough for me. I trust you both."

Doubt flickers over Elliot's features, but he tucks it away quickly.

Glancing at the clock, Oliver climbs off the bed. "We need to get moving. We should probably get there early."

Before he moves toward the door, I grab him and yank him into me. His eyes flare wide with surprise, but then he melts into me when I kiss him. We're not in enough of a rush that there isn't time for this.

I pull away, and Oliver slowly blinks open his eyes. He leans in, pressing his lips to mine again. All of a sudden, I wish we could blow off this meeting so I could drag all three of them back to bed, but I know we can't.

Neither of us want to step away, but he does so with a reluctant sigh. Wren has disappeared into the bathroom, and Elliot is watching us with a bittersweet expression.

"I know you both know," he says quietly, "but I'm happy we're together again."

I smile. “So am I, Ell. So am I.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Elliot

When we arrive at our meeting place, Axel is already waiting for us. A cold wind whips around us as we exit the SUV. This power plant is off the beaten path, and we're the only ones around. As far as I can tell, Axel is alone.

Still, we keep Wren in between us. She's proved that she can hold her own, but we can still fight off potential assailants better than she can. Oliver sticks close to her, holding her hand as we move toward Axel together.

"Is he dead?" Axel asks. His hands are buried in his coat pockets, although I'm not sure it's only because of the cold.

"Soon," I reply.

Axel frowns. "You sure you don't want to just kill him now? His reputation is already ruined."

"Not yet," Rhett says. "There's plenty I want to do to him first."

Finn is watching Axel with narrowed eyes. "What do you mean, his reputation is already ruined?"

Axel shrugs. "Word spreads fast."

“Not that fast,” Finn says. “The only people who knew about what Ludo was hiding are dead.”

But Axel shakes his head. “I downloaded the files from the email you sent and distributed them to Holloway’s other allies. At best, they won’t want to work with Ludo anymore—not that they’ll be able to. At worst, they’ll suspect he was ripping them off too, and they’ll want their fair share of cash.”

“That doesn’t help you, though,” I say. “You don’t want people coming after you.”

“With the money from the storage units, I can give them whatever they’re owed. That is, if you’re willing to give me access to Holloway’s books so I can get the numbers right.” Axel’s gaze slides to Finn. “And tell me where you stashed all the money.”

“Sounds like a pretty stupid thing for me to do,” Finn replies.

“Oh, just give it to him,” Oliver says impatiently. “It’s not like any of us need it. I think he’s more than proven himself.”

“This deal goes both ways,” I add. “Axel helped us get out, and we agreed to help him detach himself from Ludo with as few consequences as possible. Him having the money—and proof of Holloway’s dealings—are the best way to accomplish that.”

“And what will you tell everyone about Ludo?” Oliver asks.

“I’ll say he was killed by one of King or Burbank’s men. That way I don’t have to deal with potential backlash, and neither do any of you.”

“What will you do after?” Wren asks.

Axel’s eyes flash with regret. “Get my goddamn life back.”

Stepping forward, I slip one of the drives from my pocket. I got it from Finn earlier. “This is a copy, but it has everything on it.”

“Thank you.” Taking it, Axel meets my eyes. “You’ll probably start hearing the news within a couple days.”

“And the money?” Oliver asks Finn.

“You’re *sure?*” Finn asks the four of us before returning to glaring at Axel.

“Yes,” I answer firmly. “Holloway fucked over more than just King and Burbank. This is part of the deal.”

Ludo’s business partners will never stop chasing Axel if he doesn’t pay them back. Even if he ends up keeping most of it to himself, I don’t mind. None of us need the money.

With a sigh, Finn hands Axel an envelope. “Check this address tomorrow night. It’ll all be there.”

“Thank you.” Axel pulls a small bag from his pocket. The packaging is colorful, but I can’t make out what it is. “Rhett, could you . . .”

Without a word, Rhett takes the bag and slips it into his pocket. “I’ll let him know it was from you.”

“When you tell him what really happened,” Axel says thickly, “and he finds out who I am . . . tell him I’m sorry.”

Silently, Rhett nods.

Axel takes a step back toward his vehicle, but then he stops. “Give him hell for me, would you?”

Confusion flickers over Rhett’s face. “What?”

“Not Benny,” Axel says quickly. “Holloway. He took everything from me. More than I even knew. He’ll never understand what he did to me, but . . .”

“You want to pay him back, too,” Wren says softly.

“It’ll never be enough,” Axel replies, “and I know you four have plans to do every hellish thing possible to him. But . . . I just want to make sure he

gets what he deserves."

"He will," I say.

"Thank you."

We watch him retreat to his SUV and get inside. Only once he's pulled out of the small lot do we leave, too. Rhett sits in the front seat, and Oliver, Wren, and I climb into the back.

For the whole drive, I keep Wren's hand in mine. She leans against me, and Oliver leans against her.

This is it, I realize as buildings pass us by. *Everything we've been fighting for.*

Relieved tears fill my eyes. Wren squeezes my hand gently, and I kiss the top of her head.

And more.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Oliver

We sleep soundly for the rest of the night. This time, I stay in Wren's bed, and Rhett sleeps with Ell.

When I wake, Wren is still out cold. Sunlight is streaming in through the window, but it doesn't anger me the way it has for the past couple weeks. I'm not trapped in here. If I want to go outside and feel the breeze against my skin, I can.

I let myself watch Wren for a few minutes. She didn't have any nightmares—at least not while she was with me. Her breathing is even, and the worry that I've gotten used to seeing on her features is gone. I'm sure some of it'll come back when she wakes, but for now, I'm happy to see her so at peace.

Quietly, I get up and get ready for the day. My mom has always been an early riser. She still has questions, and just because I'm safe doesn't mean she isn't worried.

Once I'm dressed and ready to head downstairs, I lower myself onto the edge of the bed. I don't want Wren to wake up alone without knowing

where I went. Lightly, I run my hand down her arm.

She makes a tired sound before whispering, “I missed that.”

“I know, princess.” I smile down at her as she blinks her eyes open.

When she sees I’m fully dressed, she grabs my wrist. “Where are you going?”

“Just downstairs. Wanna talk to Mom some.”

“Mmm.” Her eyes slide closed again, and her grip on my arm loosens.

“We won’t leave you, Wren.” Leaning down, I brush my lips across her cheek. “We’ll never leave you again.”

She barely responds, only letting out a sleepy moan before fully relaxing again. I watch her for a few more seconds before heading downstairs.

As I expected, Mom is on the back porch watching Maggie sniff around the yard. It’s starting to get warmer, but early mornings are still chilly, so she’s under a blanket.

When I step outside, she looks up at me and smiles. “Sit with me?”

I settle onto the porch swing, and she drapes the blanket over my lap. Her eyes are glistening as she cups my face in her palm.

“I’m okay,” I lie.

She shakes her head. Of course she can see right through me.

“I’ll *be* okay.” I take both of her hands in mine, covering them. “You’re cold.”

“I don’t mind.” She glances around the yard. “It’s nice out here. She would’ve liked it.”

“She would’ve.”

Losing Sammy is the most devastating thing that’s ever happened to us. Of course it’s been the hardest for Rhett, but I know how deeply Mom has

mourned her all these years. Our house became a safe haven for Rhett, but even more so for Sammy.

I smile as memories of weekend breakfasts and playing dress-up fill my mind. In the summer, we'd swim in the community pool, come home to dinner, and then play in our tiny backyard until the sun went down. Then we'd watch a movie or catch fireflies or listen while Mom read us a story.

When Sammy was killed, I lost a sister, and Mom lost a daughter. I know that deep down, she wishes things had been different. We've all had the thoughts. If we could've changed the circumstances even slightly, Sammy would still be here.

"She would've loved how big the yard is," Mom whispers.

As I watch her, a familiar ache returns to my chest. It's unlike most of the other pain I've experienced. There's no way to fix this. Not even revenge will make it better, and we all know it.

"Mom . . ." I squeeze my eyes shut. "I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me that you found him?"

"I didn't think you'd be on board with what we're going to do. We're not planning on only killing him."

She laughs, although it's half a sob. "Oh, Oliver. I tried to instill goodness in you. I really did, but . . ." She gestures at herself. "I'm the wrong person to do so. But I think in the process, I led you to believe otherwise."

"What? Mom, come on. You're one of the most compassionate people I know. You're good down to your core."

But she shakes her head. "I've done things, Oliver. Things I don't regret. Things that place me far away from being a good person."

"Then I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, huh?"

Her fingers curl around my hand as she sighs. “I know you, Ollie. You didn’t give up your humanity to get to this point. None of you did.”

“Did you?”

Her smile is sad. “No. If anything, I think I found it.”

I don’t ask her what she did. If she’s ever ready, she’ll tell me. It doesn’t matter, anyway. There isn’t anything that’d change how much I love her.

“It took us years to find him,” I tell her. “But we never gave up. We got close to him—worked for him, even—and now . . . Well, you know.”

Her expression is sincere as she says, “I’ve never been more proud of you in my life.”

“Mom. I’m a *hitman.*”

“I know. Wren told me.” She shoots me a pointed look. “Don’t let her go. She’s a fighter.”

“Trust me, I know. We’re not planning on losing her. *Ever.*”

“I was harsh with her when we first met,” Mom says on a sigh. “It was the exact opposite of how I wanted it to go, but I was so scared for you. I was worried she had something to do with your disappearance.”

My heart sinks. With how meeting Elliot’s parents went, I was hoping for something better. “Does Maria know?”

Mom shakes her head. “Thankfully, she’s been so caught up in work that all she’s noticed are a few missed texts from you. I told her you were sick.”

“Got it.” I rub my face. “Fuck, I’m gonna have to get a new phone.”

“One thing at a time. Apparently, the house is trashed, so that’s probably our first priority.”

“Trashed?”

“Wren and Finn told me that Holloway sent a second team to the mansion,” Mom says. “Said they were searching for the hard drive. There’s

gonna be a mess to clean up, probably, although they haven't gone back to see what the damage was. Didn't know if the place was being watched."

Sighing, I lean back in the swing. I was hoping we could go home today and just relax. There's work to be done, but once Ludo is locked up again, most of it can wait.

"Did he hurt you?" Mom asks quietly.

I almost lie. She's reliving so much pain as it is. But we've hidden enough from her.

"He did. I got lucky that it was only once. I think he was leaning more on the psychological torture aspect, which . . ." I shudder as I remember how panicked I got whenever I heard footsteps in the hallway. "It worked."

"Torture? He *tortured* you?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle." My smile is meant to be reassuring, but the tears in my eyes ruin the picture. At the time, I wasn't sure if I could handle it. It felt like I spent an eternity in that basement, and the only reason I didn't beg for death was because Elliot was there with me.

"Oliver," Mom whispers.

"I can't talk about it," I croak. "Please, I just . . . I can't."

"Of course." She runs a hand over my hair before pulling me into her.

I'm not sure how long we stay like that, but Maggie eventually comes back to sniff at our hands. We both pet her silently until the sliding door opens, and Aubrey and Sparrow step out.

"Are we interrupting something?" Sparrow asks.

"Not at all," Mom says.

Sparrow gives her a warm smile before her gaze slides to me. "We just need to double check. Is King dead?"

I nod.

Aubrey blows out a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“For killing King? Why?”

“He’s the one who was threatening my parents,” Aubrey replies.

Well, that’s convenient.

“So they’re safe, then?” I ask.

With a nod, Aubrey smiles.

“What’re you going to do with Holloway’s body once you’ve killed him?” Sparrow asks.

“Probably—”

“If you need to get rid of it completely, pigs eat everything—even bones,” Mom says.

I laugh. One of Mom’s cousins is a pig farmer, so I’m not surprised she knows that. We’ve stayed with him a couple times when we were kids. The last time was when my dad disappeared. After that, I think the place held too many sad memories, so we never went back.

“Pretty sure your son knows how to deal with a dead body,” Sparrow says, her brown eyes sparkling.

“I was gonna say dissolve it, but pigs could be fun.”

Finn opens the sliding door, dressed in his usual black pants and T-shirt. “Breakfast is ready. Can you help get everyone up? We have a big day today.”

“We do?” I ask, but Finn is already rushing off to the kitchen. With a groan, I stand and head inside.

Rhett and Elliot are just making their way downstairs, followed by Wren, who still looks like she could sleep for another hour or two.

“Are Andrew and Benny awake yet?” I ask.

“Yeah.” Rhett pulls me into a hug. “I smelled food, so I got them up.”

“How’s Andrew?”

“Oddly quiet.” With a shake of his head, Rhett frowns. “I don’t know what he thinks about any of this.”

We join everyone else in the kitchen. Finn has a griddle fired up with pancakes going on it, and Mom has already weaseled her way in to help.

“Elliot,” she says, “I’ve got an omelette going for you.”

He groans and rubs his stomach. “You’re the best.”

“Wren, do you like omelettes?” Mom asks. “I can make one for you after his.”

“Oh, sure. Thanks.”

I grab a heaping plate of pancakes and kiss Mom on the cheek before heading into the dining room. Sparrow and Aubrey already have their food and have sat down together.

“So you’re leaving today?” I ask, trying to hide my disappointment. Aubrey is fun to hang out with, and I know how much her and Wren have missed each other.

Aubrey nods. “For the best. Finn told us about Axel’s plans. Just in case anyone comes looking for Ludo—or for me, since they think I’m his wife—it’s not a good idea for me to stick around.”

“Makes sense. And I’m glad your parents are safe now.”

I can’t lie, I’m relieved we don’t have to figure out a way to protect them. Getting captured by Ludo wasn’t part of the plan. All I want to do is spend time with the guys and Wren—and now Benny and Andrew.

That’s gonna be one hell of an adjustment.

“So am I,” Aubrey says. “They aren’t too happy with my overall plan, but this is a nice bonus. They’ll come around eventually.”

Everyone else files in slowly. Andrew is avoiding everyone's gazes, and Benny is so focused on getting food into his system that I'm not sure he even realizes there are other people in the room.

"Once Aubrey and Sparrow head out, I figure we can head over to the mansion and see how bad things are," Finn says. "Not kicking you out, but __"

"Oh shut up," Sparrow says with a grin. "You definitely are."

With a glare, Finn says, "Fine. Maybe I'm *sort of* kicking you all out. But I also know you all want to get home."

"And you're a recluse," Sparrow mutters under her breath.

Ignoring her, Finn continues, "There's more room in the mansion, anyway. I don't mind giving up my room for a night for these two." He gestures to the boys. "But I do prefer sleeping in my bed over the couch."

"You don't have to make excuses," Elliot says on a laugh. "There's a lot of us."

"Told you they wouldn't mind." Sparrow smirks and elbows Finn.

"We're going to a mansion?" Benny asks cautiously. "Mr. Holloway's mansion?"

"No." Rhett is sitting next to Benny, so he squeezes his arm reassuringly. "It's our home."

"We're staying with you?"

"For now," Andrew answers darkly, wiping off the relieved look from Benny's face. "We still have to figure out how to transfer your custody to me."

Rhett schools his expression immediately. None of us have talked about it, but I think we're all on the same page. Andrew is too young—and much too immature—to take care of a twelve-year-old.

“We’ll get that sorted soon enough,” Elliot says. “For now, we can keep you both hidden and safe.”

Andrew doesn’t respond. I’m not really sure where his loyalties lie, although I don’t think they’re with Ludo anymore. That doesn’t mean they’re with us, though.

I exchange a suspicious glance with Rhett. Something is up with him. Whatever it is, Andrew had better not try to fuck us over.

I’m done with people trying to hurt us.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Rhett

After cleaning up from breakfast, we say goodbye to Aubrey and Sparrow. I hate how sad it makes Wren, but I'm hoping we'll be able to cheer her up soon. Now that we're free, I just want to put this all behind us.

Well, except torturing Ludo. *That* I plan to draw out for as long as I can. I won't make it last forever—having him in the house will put a strain on all of us, I'm sure. But that doesn't mean I'll go easy on him.

He has a lifetime of pain to make up for.

Finn, Meredith, Oliver, and Elliot stay behind to deal with Ludo. I go with Wren to get the boys to the house. The plan is to keep them so distracted with getting their rooms ready that Benny doesn't even notice the others bringing Holloway inside.

When we get to the house, everything looks fine from the outside. Makes sense—Holloway's men at least know better than to draw unnecessary attention. Once we get inside, though, the mess is noticeable immediately.

All of the kitchen cabinets are open, although most of the dishes are unbroken, thank fuck. A couple chairs are knocked over, and the trash has

been sitting for long enough that it smells awful.

The rest of the house is mostly the same. Ludo's men broke a couple things, but for the most part, they were intent on looking for the hard drive. We can deal with overturned furniture and flipped mattresses without too much work.

"What happened here?" Benny asks as we make our way through the house.

"Ludo sent his men here to look for something," I say.

"Did they find it?"

"No. Finn hid it elsewhere when we were taken."

Thankfully, he doesn't ask more questions about Holloway. I know he has them, but maybe the tiredness in my voice is deterring him.

There are two guest rooms on the first floor. They're not technically bedrooms, but that's what we decided to turn them into. Normally, Maria and Meredith spend Christmas Eve with us, and that's where they sleep. I figure the boys can stay in them until we figure out how to deal with the custody situation.

It doesn't even take an hour to right all the furniture in their rooms and show the boys around the house. When I hear the garage door opening, I take them into the library, where we stay until Elliot finds us.

He nods silently to me, signaling that Ludo is locked up again.

"The house doesn't look too bad," I say. "Not much of anything is broken."

"I'm glad Finn had the foresight to collect our computers." Elliot rubs his face. "Imagine if they'd stolen all of it."

"I'd prefer not to." As I pass him, I kiss his cheek, my hand lingering on his waist.

“Better to focus on the fact that we’re all okay, huh?”

“Much better.”

Downstairs, Finn and Meredith are putting the living room back to normal. I wasn’t expecting them to help, but I’m not surprised that they are. Finn can whine about how annoying family can be for hours, but he’s part of ours, and we’re part of his. We’ll do just about anything for each other.

“Hey,” Oliver calls, “does anyone know what happened to that vase that we keep on that shelf by the front door?” He comes into view, a frown on his face.

“The blue and white one?” Finn asks. His gaze flicks to Wren.

“Yeah. The rug we had in there is gone, too.”

“That’s odd,” Elliot mutters, scratching his head.

“The rug is getting cleaned,” Finn says, standing the coffee table upright. “Was soaked with blood from the men we killed. I had some friends come in to deal with the cleanup since I needed to get Wren out of here.”

Oliver perks up. “Do you think they’d know what happened to the vase?”

“Maybe.” Finn turns away then, stooping to pick up a couple books that fell off the table.

“You don’t know, do you, Wren?” Oliver asks. “I know it’s just a vase, but I really like it.”

“I broke it,” she replies quietly, dropping her gaze to the floor. “I’m sorr __”

“She saved my life with it,” Finn says. “Knocked one of the guys over the head to disorient him. It gave me the upper hand.”

Laughing, Oliver slings an arm around Wren’s shoulders. “Well, I can’t exactly be disappointed at that, can I?”

She looks up. “But—”

Swiftly, Oliver moves in and kisses her. “The two of you are far more important than a vase, princess. Don’t worry about it.”

With all of us working together, we’re able to get the house put back together in a few hours. Finn heads home before dinner, and after realizing that a lot of the food in the kitchen has spoiled, we order in.

Benny seems ecstatic to have a whole mansion to explore, so after we eat, he runs off with Meredith on his heels. The guys and Wren seem to have cleanup handled, so when Andrew slinks off to his room, I follow. He’s barely said a word since we left Ludo’s mansion, which makes me think he has something up his sleeve.

I knock on his door, and when he opens it and sees me standing in the hallway, his eyes widen.

“Don’t kill me,” he blurts, stumbling back. “I’m sorry. Really, Rhett. I’d take it all back if I could.”

I glance around his room, half expecting to find something incriminating lying around, but I come up empty. “I’m not gonna kill you.”

He releases a long breath and sinks onto the bed.

“To be clear, if you weren’t family, I would’ve already.” I cross my arms and glare down at him. “And if any of them had died, even that wouldn’t’ve stopped me.”

Andrew gulps, only staring at the floor.

“Is that why you’ve been so quiet? You’ve been scared?”

Nodding, he meets my gaze. “I thought you were just waiting for a convenient time to get me away from Benny.”

“Fair enough.”

“You’re not getting custody of him.” Andrew straightens, chin high. “He’s mine to take care of.”

With a sigh, I lean against the doorframe. It's foolish that he thinks he can take care of Benny. He's practically a child himself. He won't appreciate me saying that, though.

"He wants me," Andrew continues. "Our plan was to get away from Dad *together."*

"What about Corinne?"

"What about her?"

"If Richard wasn't in the picture, would you both be okay with going back home?"

So far, it's the only option I've come up with. Andrew can't parent Benny, but I'm not confident that I can, either. Plus, I can't put that on the guys and Wren—not without all of us talking about it, at least.

"Mom is better when she's not around Dad," Andrew says. "But he brings out the worst side in her. She can be a downright bitch."

"Is that a yes or a no?" I'm not forcing Benny to live with Corinne—not if he doesn't want to.

"We'd have to talk about it. It's mostly up to Ben. I don't want to live at home anymore regardless."

"What're you going to do now?"

He bristles. "I don't need your advice."

"Wasn't going to give any. Unless you somehow manage to involve yourself with someone worse than Ludo."

Scowling, Andrew bites out, "I only did that for Benny. I had plans before. I was gonna go to college."

I'm tempted to ask what for, but I just nod. The only thing between us is tension. I've threatened his life twice already, for fuck's sake. Of course he isn't going to open up to me.

“We’ll figure things out,” I say. “No more making shady deals, okay?”

Andrew nods. I don’t think I need to explain to him how horribly things could’ve gone. He knows, and he won’t make the same mistake again. And if he tries to, I won’t let him.

“I just want to make sure Benny is okay.” Andrew looks away and stares out the window. “He was panicking last night that he’d have to go back home.”

“That’s not happening,” I say firmly. “I promised him it wouldn’t.”

Andrew shrugs. “He’s always been anxious.”

I know what it’s like to be young and have your whole life feel unstable. It’s hell on earth. It’s even harder when you’re the older sibling who’s trying to protect the younger one. I don’t want either of them to have to sit in all this uncertainty.

“Talk to Benny about Corinne,” I tell Andrew. “Give yourselves some time to think on it.”

“Does it matter? She doesn’t want to leave Dad. We tried to convince her to.”

“We’ll see.” It’s all I can say. I’m still not sure if I can trust him.

I leave, shutting the door behind me. Making sure Benny feels secure needs to be one of my first priorities, and it will be. But there’s one thing that tops everything else. I’ve put it off for long enough.

I need to talk to Wren.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Wren

Cleaning up after dinner doesn’t take long. We’re pretty quiet, I think because we’re all so tired. Sleep only helps some when we have so much on our shoulders.

“Ludo won’t be able to get out, right?” I ask.

“Not even a chance.” After drying his hands, Elliot hangs up the dishtowel and opens his arms to me. When I enter them, he kisses my forehead. “We’ll show you where we’re keeping him tomorrow, but for now, just trust us. There’s no way he’s escaping.”

“I’ll always trust you.”

Oliver joins our hug, pressing his lips to Ell’s before nuzzling his face in my neck. “We built a special room just for him. Took every precaution possible.”

Right. It’s silly of me to be worried. They’ve been planning this for a decade.

“How long are we going to keep him here?” I ask.

“As long as Rhett wants,” Elliot replies, “but I can’t imagine he’ll want to drag this out for too long. I think we’re all ready to move on.”

“Definitely.” Resting my head against Elliot’s chest, I close my eyes. Days ago, I was desperate to see him, hoping it wouldn’t be my last time. Being in his and Oliver’s embrace feels all the more sweeter now that I have them again.

“I’m never letting any of you go ever again,” Elliot murmurs.

Oliver tightens his arms around us. “I’m holding you to that.”

“Hey,” Meredith says, and we break apart when she and Benny enter the kitchen. “I was gonna put a movie on for Benny. Figured you all might want to join?”

“Sure, Mom. I’ll make some popcorn.”

I help Oliver gather bowls, and we carry everything into the living room together. Unsurprisingly, it looks like Benny already has a movie picked out.

Rhett steps into the living room after us. He looks freshly showered, and while we’re all still tired, it doesn’t seem like he has quite as much weighing down on him. His eyes land on me, and he opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, but then he closes it.

I give him a questioning look, but he shakes his head and settles on the love seat. Before any of us can join him, Benny climbs onto it with a blanket and a bowl of popcorn.

“Oh, hey,” Rhett says, pulling a small package out of his pocket. “I have something for you.”

Gasping with delight, Benny snatches it from Rhett’s hands. “Gummies!”

Rhett smiles. “From Axel.”

That makes Benny’s face fall. “Where is he? Will I get to see him again?”

“Probably not. He wanted me to tell you goodbye, and to take care of yourself. I’m sorry, buddy.”

“Oh,” Benny says quietly, staring down at the package.

Meredith presses play on the movie, probably assuming that the best thing for Benny right now is an immediate distraction. Oliver and I sit on either side of Elliot, and Meredith and Andrew take the armchairs.

I’m so happy to be doing something like this again that it’s hard to pay attention to the movie. It’s different than normal since there’s more than just the four of us here, but not in a bad way. This can be a new normal.

It’s still good. We’re all safe, we’ve finally reached the last stage of our plan, and no one is standing in our way anymore.

We’re getting everything we wanted, I realize, my gaze falling on Benny and Rhett. *And more.*

. . .

Once the movie ends, the boys go to bed, and Meredith heads home. I was beginning to wonder if she was going to spend the night here, but I guess Andrew is sleeping in the room she normally stays in. She seems reluctant to say goodbye to Oliver, though.

I’m exhausted, so I shower and get ready for bed. This time, when I pull one of the guys’ old T-shirts over my head, it doesn’t make my eyes sting with tears. Instead, I inhale, taking in the scent of laundry soap and smiling.

There’s a knock at my door, and when I open it, Rhett is standing in the hallway. A soft smile forms on his lips when he takes me in.

“What?”

“I just like you in my shirts.” Leaning down, he brushes his lips over my jawbone. His hands grasp at my waist, pulling me tightly into him. “And in black.”

Warmth floods my body, and I wrap my arms around his neck. Rhett wastes no time in kissing me. As he does, he backs me into the room and nudges the door shut with his foot.

We had some time together yesterday, but most of it was spent sleeping—or having sex. It’s what we needed, but I feel like I haven’t had any time to catch up with him.

“I thought about you,” I whisper in between soft kisses. “I thought about you so often. All I wanted was a chance to hold you again.”

Rhett’s arms come around my body until he has me flattened against his chest. My head rests on his shoulder, and I breathe deeply as the scents of cedar and sage wash over me like a balm to my soul.

We were only apart for two weeks, but it felt like months—*years*. I don’t think there was ever a point where I took the guys for granted, but now I know for sure that I never will.

“I can’t live without you three,” I say before pressing a kiss to Rhett’s shoulder.

“We’re not going anywhere,” he says reassuringly, and his hold on me tightens. “Never again, Wren. I’m never risking any of your safety *ever* again.”

He pulls away before I want him to. Something in his eyes keeps me from closing the distance between us again. His lips are parted, and the look on his face is similar to last night, except this time, the hesitation is missing.

“Rhett,” I whisper. “It’s okay if—”

“I’m ready,” he says, his voice firm. “I never should’ve waited to tell you. I almost lost my chance—my *only chance*—all because I got caught up in letting the wrong person have a piece of me.”

My breath catches in my throat. I was prepared to wait years for this moment, if it ever came. My heart would break if it hurt Rhett to tell me, but he doesn’t seem like he’s struggling. Maybe he’s a little regretful, but that’s different. He *wants* this.

“You’re sure?”

“I can’t live like that anymore,” he murmurs, brushing his nose against mine tenderly. “You’re far too important to me. I love you, Wren Taylor, more than words could ever describe. You deserve to know. You deserve to hear it. You deserve—”

Before he can finish, I fit my mouth to his. I should probably let him keep going, but my heart is so full it’s bursting at the seams. With a startled sound, Rhett grabs my waist. His lips move against mine slowly at first, and then more confidently as I slip my arms around his neck.

“I love you, too,” I breathe out.

My body feels light, and kissing Rhett is getting a little awkward because I can’t stop smiling. Is there a better way to end today? I can’t think of one. Of course I already knew Rhett loves me, but hearing him say it? Knowing he’s gotten to a point where he *can?*

I know I’m precious to him, but this reinforces it. It helps heal the part of me that hasn’t caught up with the present yet and is still terrified I’ll lose him.

As my smile morphs into a laugh, I back Rhett up to my bed and push him onto it. I crawl onto him and straddle his hips, savoring the feeling of his body against mine.

He reaches up, his fingertips feathering over my cheek. “I’m so sorry I waited to tell you, sweetheart.”

“Don’t apologize. You needed time.” Bracing myself on my elbows, I pepper kisses all over his face. “I told you, Rhett. I want to love you the way you need to be loved.”

At my statement, his expression softens. “Sweetheart . . .” But he doesn’t go on. I don’t think he knows how to.

Finally, I press my lips to his. He cups the back of my head as he kisses me sweetly. When his tongue slips into my mouth, I caress it with my own.

“Tell me again,” I whisper.

“I love you.” He doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t look away. There’s no pain or discomfort on his features.

A new smile takes over my face, and there isn’t a thing I could do to stop it. In the course of a few weeks, I’ve gone from almost losing everything I wanted, to getting it all back and more.

“I need to see you.” Rhett’s voice is hoarse, his gaze so intense it burns.

Before I move back, I brush my lips up his neck one last time. My fingers grip the edge of my shirt before I pull it over my head and toss it onto the floor. Rhett’s eyes darken as he takes me in.

“God, Wren.” His hands travel up my body until they’re cupping my breasts. He squeezes them gently, making me moan. “I missed you so much.”

There’s a heaviness to his words that hits me hard. It’s something that I can’t ignore forever, but I can for tonight. Right now, I want to focus on *us*—on how we’re finally together again. So I roll my hips into him, feeling how hard he is through his briefs.

Letting out a choked groan, Rhett sits up and fits his mouth to mine. One of his hands wraps around my throat, and it feels so natural to let him hold me like this. I slide my tongue into his mouth as I continue grinding against him. My panties are soaked—I can feel it—and I'm only getting more turned on.

"Heaven," Rhett mutters against my lips. "You feel like heaven, sweetheart."

Grasping his shoulders, I move faster, needing to somehow get even closer to him than I already am. He groans into my mouth. The sound only feeds into my need, and I fuse my mouth to his in a desperate attempt for more.

"Fuck." Rhett tosses me onto the bed and yanks my panties down my legs. His breathing is already hard as he tears his own clothes off his body.

I lick my lips at the sight of him. His cock is hard, and all of a sudden, my mind is consumed with thoughts of taking as much of it into my mouth as possible. Stroking it, feeling the soft skin under my touch, tasting him . . .

Without realizing, I crawl toward him. He's kneeling on the bed, watching me silently, his eyes full of heat. I wrap one hand around his dick and stroke. A soft breath escapes his lips just as I run my tongue over the tip.

"Sweetheart." He gathers my hair in his hands to keep it out of my face as I suck lightly.

My own moans fill the air as I take more of him in with each bob of my head. The guest rooms are on the other end of the house, so I'm not worried about anyone hearing us. Although I'm sure Elliot and Oliver have come upstairs by now.

As I work my way up and down Rhett's cock, I stroke it with my tongue. He tilts his head back with a low groan as my hand follows my mouth.

Someone knocks on the door, and his grip on my hair tightens when I move to pull away. “Don’t stop,” he tells me. “I told them to come in after a little bit. I know you’ve missed them, too.”

My heart melts.

“Fuck, look how wet you got her,” Oliver says from behind me, and then I feel him climb onto the bed. He palms my ass and presses a kiss to the small of my back.

Elliot crawls onto the mattress, stopping by Rhett and pulling him into a kiss. As Oliver traces a finger through my arousal, I whimper. I’m practically aching with need.

“Who’re those for?” Rhett asks.

I try to move away again to see what he’s talking about, but he holds onto my head and thrusts into my mouth.

“Not yet, sweetheart. You feel too good. I can’t let you stop.”

My groan of protest is halfhearted at best.

“They’re for her,” Elliot replies. “We’ve waited long enough.”

Oliver sinks a finger into me, and I focus on the tip of Rhett’s cock, trying to look Elliot’s way to see what he’s talking about. Rhett catches on to what I’m doing and guides my head back into position. Slowly, he slides in and out of my mouth while holding me in place.

“Be a good girl, Wren,” he chides. “You’ll see soon enough.”

“Just focus on him,” Oliver says as he rubs my clit.

I do my best to obey. Closing my eyes makes it easier to ignore whatever Elliot is doing, but I can’t keep all of my attention on Rhett. Oliver is massaging my clit just right, and it sends my mind into a fuzzy, pleasure-induced haze.

After a minute, Rhett’s hold on my head loosens. “You ready?”

“Whenever you are,” Elliot says.

Rhett pulls out of my mouth. Before I can see anything, he leans down and kisses me. The second he pulls away, Elliot grabs my chin and seals his lips to mine.

“We never would’ve gotten out if it wasn’t for what you found, love.” His lips trail across my jawbone before he kisses the spot below my ear tenderly.

That ache returns to my chest, and I shake my head. “I—”

“Let us show you how much that means to us,” Oliver says as he slips something soft over my eyes.

I gasp, reaching up to feel the silk fabric. I wasn’t expecting them to blindfold me.

“Is this okay, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I trust you.”

“Hold out your arms,” Elliot tells me.

When I do so, I feel the familiar material of rope winding around them. I sit back on my heels, and once Oliver is done tying the blindfold over my eyes, he slips his hand in between my legs. Shuddering, I spread them wider for him.

“Such a good girl.” Oliver kisses my neck as I lean back into him.

“More. Please, I want more.”

“Always,” Oliver whispers in my ear.

Rhett moves away from me, and I hear the unmistakable sound of him opening a bottle of lube. “Oliver.”

“Give it to me,” he replies, pulling his hand away from me.

I whine at the loss of his touch, wishing I could reach out to him, but Elliot has my wrists tied together.

“Always so impatient,” Oliver says on a snicker. “Bend forward.”

I do, resting my cheek on the blankets. Someone—Elliot, I think—strokes his hand down my arm as Oliver squirts lube in between my ass cheeks.

“You want more, princess?” Oliver asks. “I’ll give you *more.”*

Oliver slides a finger into my back hole, pushing lube inside. I whimper at the feeling, raising my ass to give him better access.

“What’re you thinking?” Rhett asks.

There’s silence, and I lift my head, trying to see through the edges of the blindfold.

“Ah ah, love.” Elliot lays a gentle hand on my head, pushing it back down. “No peeking.”

“Her ass is mine,” Oliver says as he inserts a second finger.

Once he’s done prepping me, he climbs off the bed, and a few seconds later I hear the bathroom sink running.

“Lift your hands,” Elliot tells me.

I straighten up so I’m kneeling again, and I feel something pulling my wrists even farther upward. Whatever Elliot is fastening the length of rope to, it’s above me.

The hook, I realize.

Someone lightly pinches one of my nipples. I lean into it, a soft moan escaping my throat.

“So beautiful,” Rhett whispers. His lips meet mine, and he grips my throat as he plunges his tongue into my mouth. Only once Oliver is back does he let me go.

“Pick her up,” Elliot says.

I feel Rhett’s arms come around me, and he lifts me up while Elliot gets into position. Once he’s ready, Rhett lowers me down. Someone pushes my

legs open, and as they adjust me so I'm straddling Elliot, he guides his cock into me.

"Fuck," Elliot groans. His hands settle on my waist as I slowly roll my hips.

"Now, Oliver," Rhett says.

From behind, Oliver kisses my shoulder. "You ready, princess?"

I nod, so he presses into me carefully while Rhett leans in and kisses me. I do my best to stay relaxed as Oliver starts sliding in and out.

"I love feeling him inside of you." Elliot thrusts up into me, his voice tight. "God, Ol. Harder."

"Can you take it?" Oliver murmurs teasingly in my ear.

"Yes," I moan.

Oliver holds onto my hips, his hands just below Elliot's. He drives into me with more force, causing me to lose my breath. I lean forward more, the rope around my wrists taking a little of my weight.

"What a sight," Rhett mutters, reaching down to find my clit. "Fucking perfect."

I gasp at his touch. His finger circles my clit as Oliver thrusts into me. It's almost more than I can bear, especially when Rhett slams his lips to mine and refuses to pull away.

"That's it." Elliot's voice is strained. "Make her come on our cocks."

With a groan, Oliver picks up his pace. My breath hitches, and I feel tension building low in my stomach. Rhett plays with my clit, only breaking off our kiss for a few seconds so I can gasp for air.

The blindfold is still nestled over my eyes, and it heightens my senses. It only takes a few minutes before I tumble into my first orgasm. I cry out, and Rhett swallows the sound, lightening his touch on my clit.

“Oh my god,” Oliver groans. “You both feel so good.”

Once the remnants of my orgasm have washed away, Rhett pulls back. I wish I could see him—see where he’s looking and what’s on his expression. But then I feel his lips on my breasts as he peppers them with kisses. He licks one of my nipples before he sucks on it, and I groan.

“More?” Oliver asks as he thrusts into me.

“Definitely,” Elliot replies. “Make her come again.”

And they do. I come two more times before Oliver finishes inside me. By the time he pulls out, I’m exhausted and shaking, but I don’t stop. I start riding Elliot, moaning at the feeling of him sliding in and out of me.

“Fuck, just like that,” Elliot says. “Don’t change a thing.”

Rhett is kissing my neck while working my clit gently. I’m not sure where exactly Oliver is, although I think he collapsed next to us on the bed.

“Fuck him harder, sweetheart,” Rhett tells me. “Make him give you every drop of cum he’s got.”

I’m already going as hard as I can, but I try anyway. When Rhett starts rubbing my clit faster, I cry out, feeling myself clench around Elliot’s dick.

“God, Wren,” Elliot groans. His voice is tight, and his hand—at least I think it’s his hand—slides up my thigh.

“So fucking hot,” Oliver mutters.

“Touch her, O,” Rhett says. “Show her how you feel.”

Within seconds, I feel his lips dragging up my body. Having all their hands on me and knowing they’re all watching me sends pleasure coursing through my body. Sparks shoot through my veins as Rhett speeds up his hand.

“One more time,” Elliot pants. “Make her come one more time—*fuck*, quickly.”

“You’re doing so well, princess,” Oliver praises as my whimpers fill the room.

I’m so close. *So close.* The tension in my body is only building higher, and my thoughts slow as my orgasm creeps closer.

“I wish you could see yourself,” Rhett murmurs in my ear. “I wish you could see the way they’re watching you. My beautiful whore.”

“Fuck,” I cry. My orgasm crashes into me, so powerful I lose my breath.

Rhett and Oliver hold me steady as Elliot takes over, thrusting into me a few times before he lets out a deep groan. I feel him shudder underneath me as he comes, his hold on my hips tightening.

“I knew you had it in you.” Oliver kisses me gently before undoing the blindfold.

When I blink open my eyes, I find all three of them smiling at me. I arch upward and press my lips to Rhett’s in a tired, shaky kiss. He strokes his fingers down my cheek, and when he pulls away, my heart skips a beat at the heat in his eyes.

“Let’s get you untied,” Elliot says.

Rhett and Oliver lift me off him so he can get out from underneath me. Once he’s up, Elliot kneels in front of me. His kiss is sweet, and then he unties me and rubs my wrists.

“You feel okay?” he asks.

“Mmhmm.” Slipping my arms around his neck, I pull him down for another kiss. This one is deeper and almost lazy. His body is warm against mine as my thoughts turn hazy from the way his lips move against mine.

When I break off the kiss, Rhett is waiting for me. He has me lie down on my back with Elliot and Oliver on either side of me, and then he positions

himself between my knees. Pushing my legs up, he guides his lubed-up cock into my ass, slowly pushing inside.

I can't take my eyes off him. He's staying upright, his gaze locked on where he's sliding in and out of me. I smile. He's always loved watching that.

"God, sweetheart." Once he's found a good pace, his gaze slides to my face. "You feel amazing." He starts rubbing my clit, but I shake my head.

"No." Grabbing onto his arms, I pull him down. "I want to feel you against me." I wrap my legs around his waist, trapping him against me, and he presses light kisses to my neck.

"I love you," Rhett whispers as he slides deep into me. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Each time he says the words, he places a tender kiss to my neck and face. Tears well in my eyes—happy ones, I think—as he keeps going. By the time Rhett is kissing my lips fervently, I've lost track of how many times he's said it.

I cling to him while he fucks me deep and slow. Oliver and Elliot watch, one of them stroking my hair while the other holds my hand. And my heart finally starts to believe that this is happening—that I finally have them back.

"Rhett," I sob, unable to hold back any longer. "Oliver. Ell."

Pausing, Rhett pushes up so he can see me. "What's wrong? Wren—sweetheart, it's okay." He brushes away my tears, but more replace them instantly.

"Don't stop. Please don't stop."

Rhett looks to Elliot and then Oliver before slowly starting up again. I pull him into me, but he stays up enough that he can keep watching my

face.

"We're okay," he whispers.

"I know. That's why . . ." I sniffle and do my best to blink back my tears. "I'm just so happy to have you three home again."

Oliver strokes a hand over my hair. "We know, princess."

"We're happy to be back, too," Elliot says.

Leaning down, Rhett captures my mouth with his in a kiss that washes all my pain away, even if it's only temporary. The ache in my chest lets up, and I hold his head and kiss him back until his thrusts slow and he comes inside me.

"You're my forever," I say as he lifts me into his arms. When Oliver and Elliot join us, their arms encircling me, I make sure to look them both in the eye. "*Forever* forever."

"And you're ours, love," Elliot tells me, his expression full of warmth and the slightest hint of amusement.

With a happy sigh, I relax into them and let my eyes slide closed. We have a lot to heal from and a lot to work through, but that's manageable. It's *good*. And feeling all three of them against me, that's what I want. I wouldn't choose any life other than the one where we get to help each other heal, and I'll never stop being grateful for the fact that we actually get to.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Elliot

A soft kiss on the cheek pulls me from my light sleep. I was already half awake, my body curled around Wren's, but now I blink my eyes open.

She's smiling down at me, her gaze full of a tenderness that sends warmth cascading down my body. "Morning."

"Morning," I say tiredly.

"I heard the guys get up a half hour ago. Figure we should get up, too."

Sighing, I nod. There's still plenty to do. First on my list is grocery shopping. Second is talking to Rhett. Last we spoke of it, he still wasn't on board with killing Richard. It feels weird that I want to convince him to kill his own father, but I don't think he'll find peace without doing it.

Wren starts to get out of bed, but I catch her by the waist and haul her back. She doesn't even look surprised. I caress her face, taking in the way the morning sunlight washes over her skin.

"I told you," I whisper. "I said you'd get us out, and you did."

Her smile lights up my soul. "And I knew we could trust your plan."

We head downstairs with our hands clasped together. In the kitchen, there's a large takeout bag on the counter with a variety of breakfast sandwiches inside. Both Wren and I grab one before sitting at the table with Rhett and Oliver.

"Are the boys still asleep?" I ask.

Rhett nods.

"We were just talking about Richard," Oliver says, his tone hushed.

"Oh?" I bite into my sandwich, hoping this is going where I want it to.

"We can't let him stay alive." Rhett's eyes are hard, his expression set. "Not only to protect Benny, but because of what we've learned about him over the past month or so. I thought he neglected me and Sam because he was mourning, but he was off living a second life. He's at fault for her death just as much as Holloway is."

"All right. How do we do it?"

Grimacing, Oliver stands. "Either of you want coffee?"

"Sure," Wren says, and I nod.

"I want to do it alone." Rhett stares at the table, his fists clenched. He knows we won't agree to this. "He's not a threat. I can handle him by myself."

"Are you going to confront him?" I ask.

He nods.

"And if you freeze?" Crossing my arms, I stare him down from across the table. Not that it does any good, considering he's still not looking at any of us.

"Already asked him that," Oliver says as he pours coffee into two mugs.

"And what was your answer?"

"I won't freeze."

Tipping my head back, I release a slow, even breath. I want to believe him—I really do. But there's a part of Rhett that still believes all the things his father told him. It doesn't matter how strong or intimidating or powerful Rhett is. Deep down, he's always been afraid of Richard. I've never judged him for it—never blamed him, either. It's just the truth.

"I don't think it's a good idea," I say.

"Well, I do."

Oliver sets the mugs down in front of me and Wren. He squeezes my shoulder and kisses Wren's temple before speaking up. "You think it's a good idea to put us through *more* stress? *More* anxiety? We've all been through hell, and we barely made it out alive."

Thankfully, Rhett doesn't seem to have a protest to that. He sighs, finally raising his eyes to meet mine. "I just don't want him to hurt any of you."

Wren tilts her head. "But you said he's not a threat."

"Not physically, no. But he has this way of twisting your thoughts around until you're all backward. I . . . I don't want you to experience that, sweetheart. And Ell and O have been through enough of it."

"So have you," I grit out.

"That's different!"

"Exactly," Oliver says, sitting down next to Wren and sliding his hand over her thigh. "No offense, Rhett, but you're the most likely to fall prey to his manipulations. Not me, not Ell, not Wren. If you were only going to kill him, then that's one thing. I don't blame you for wanting closure—for wanting to say everything you've been holding back all this time. But you shouldn't be alone."

Rhett shakes his head, but when he opens his mouth to speak, he's cut off.

“No!” Wren’s voice is steeped in more pain that she should ever have to bear. “I don’t want *you* to get hurt again.”

“But—”

“I get that you’re trying to protect us.” Her voice softens, and she reaches across the table and covers one of his fists with her hand. “But this isn’t something you have to do alone. Please, Rhett. I can’t handle any more anxiety right now, and you need support. We’re stronger together.”

I almost add that if Rhett decides to kill Richard alone, I’ll simply follow him, but maybe it’s best he doesn’t know that.

Rhett’s gaze travels from Wren to me to Oliver before he dips his head. “Fine,” he says softly. “I texted Finn last night. He’s working on learning Richard and Corinne’s schedules so we can get him at the right time. I’m thinking a staged suicide makes the most sense.”

“And what about Andrew and Benny?” Oliver asks. “They’re still missing according to the authorities.”

“That I haven’t figured out yet,” Rhett says. “I’m trying to give the boys time to decide if Benny is okay going back to Corinne after Richard is dead.”

“You think that’s a good option? We could—” I stop.

Could we? The four of us haven’t discussed it yet, but if Benny doesn’t want to live with his mother, maybe he could live with us. If we’re all on board, that is.

“We could what?” Rhett asks. “Take him in? How? Corinne has legal custody, and it doesn’t sound like it’ll be easy to prove that she’s an unfit parent. I’m not sure she *is* an unfit parent.”

“But what if he wants to live with you?” Wren’s voice is soft as she looks at Rhett. “He seems to have really taken to you.”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Regardless,” Oliver says, “he has to go back to Corinne at some point. We can’t keep him here forever. He needs to go back to school, back to his friends. It’s not like we can hide him for the rest of his life.”

That seems to both relieve Rhett and worry him.

“So we wait a week or two until after Richard dies,” I say. “And then we send in an anonymous tip. We can hide the boys somewhere and let the cops find them.”

Rhett frowns. “And what do they say? That they were kidnapped for no reason?”

“It worked when I had to pretend I was kidnapped,” Wren says. “I wasn’t much help in providing information since I just told the cops I didn’t see or hear much of anything. I don’t think the case ever went anywhere.”

“The police will have questions,” I say, “but they won’t have any way to get answers. They’ll hit a dead end almost immediately upon questioning the boys.”

Oliver leans back in his chair. “Sounds like it’ll work to me.”

“We have time to iron out the details,” I add. “Especially since we’re killing Richard first. We’ll want to wait a while before sending the boys back. If the events happen too closely together, the authorities could suspect a connection—and that Richard’s suicide is staged.”

Nodding in agreement, Rhett says, “A week at least.”

“And what about Ludo?” Wren asks, glancing between us. “How long are we keeping him alive?”

“I don’t know.” With a sigh, Rhett rubs his face. “Until it feels like enough, I guess. Or until we can’t take it anymore.”

“I haven’t heard him at all,” Wren says. “I guess I expected some yelling or something, like how it was with Jordan.”

Oliver shakes his head. “Ludo is in a soundproof room.”

“Soundproof?” She raises her eyebrows, but then she smiles. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Standing, Rhett scoops up his mug and empty sandwich wrapper. “We should check on him.”

“Where is he?” Wren asks. “The basement?”

I stand, too. “Yeah, but not where you’ve been. We’ll show you.”

“I’ll stay up here,” Oliver says quickly. “You know, in case the boys wake up.”

Rhett pauses as he sets his mug in his sink. Before now, Oliver has never expressed a desire to avoid this part of our plan. He’s been excited about it—we all have.

They still don’t know what Ludo did to him, I realize. I haven’t told Rhett or Wren, and Oliver understandably hasn’t wanted to talk about it.

“All right.” Moving back to the table, Rhett leans down and kisses Oliver’s cheek. “Whatever you need.”

At that, Oliver visibly relaxes. He turns his head and brushes his lips against Rhett’s. I drop my gaze, guilt twisting up my insides. There’s no denying that this is entirely because of me. I was foolish, and Oliver paid the price for it.

As we leave the kitchen, I don’t meet Oliver’s eyes, even though I can feel him staring at me. It’ll hurt to look at him.

Wren starts heading toward the basement, but Rhett grabs her hand and leads her to a different part of the house. There’s a second basement—one that was built with a later addition to the mansion—and that’s where we’re

keeping Holloway. We redid it and put in a soundproof chamber specifically for keeping Ludo.

"Oh," Wren murmurs when Rhett opens a door that leads downward. "*Two* basements? Every time I think this place can't get bigger, somehow it does."

Flipping on the light, Rhett goes first. His shoulders are stiff, and I wonder how he feels right now. We've finally gotten what we've been fighting for—we're so close to avenging Sammy—yet it requires being in the same room with the person Rhett hates the most.

At the bottom of the stairs, Wren looks around. This portion of the basement is basically empty. The only thing worth looking at is the reinforced steel door on the far wall.

"He's in there?" she asks.

Rhett nods.

"He's tied up though, right? I mean, I know he can't get out, but . . ." She swallows audibly.

"He's restrained," I assure her. We're not taking any chances.

Rhett unlocks the door—a two-part process that requires a passcode *and* a physical key—and swings it open. Inside, the cell is empty except for Ludo and the drain that's in the middle of the floor.

Holloway is on the ground. His wrists are cuffed, attached to short chains that are connected to the wall. He has some room to move, but not much.

As we enter, he watches us. There's blood on his shirt, and his skin is covered in bruises. Some of it's from when Wren hit him with the car, but most of it is from Meredith. The first night at the farmhouse, she had plenty she wanted to do—and say—to Ludo.

“Why?” he asks once I step in after Rhett and Wren. “Why keep me alive?”

“Why’d you keep us alive?” Rhett shoots back.

“That’s different.”

Rhett’s laugh fills the small room. It’s a mirthless sound, one that would scare me if I didn’t know Rhett would never hurt me. Slowly, he lowers himself to a crouch in front of Ludo. “Tell me something. Does the name Samantha Brooks ring a bell for you?”

“She was your sister.” Ludo pulls against his restraints. “What’s that got to do with me?”

“Do you know what happened to her?” Rhett asks. His voice is even and so much calmer than I thought it would be.

“Of course I do,” Ludo spits out. He’s done his own research on us—he admitted to it. “She was shot. No one ever caught the guy who did it.”

“Until now.”

Realization falls over Ludo’s features. “The little girl,” he whispers. “She was . . . that was . . .”

“She was my sister.”

Ludo’s gaze flicks to me. “This was never about the hard drive. It was never about the money. You’ve been targeting me for years. The—the Garden Grille. Was that you?”

“No. That was Axel.” Standing, Rhett slides his hands into his pockets. “He was happy to help us escape—and to finish ruining you. All your secrets? He’s already spreading them. You’re finished, Holloway.”

Straightening his posture as much as he can, Ludo glares up at Rhett. “You’ll never get me to beg for mercy.”

Rhett smiles. “We’ll see about that.” Turning, his hand slides down Wren’s back. “Let’s go.”

We step out, and I don’t bother to look back.

“You can kill me,” Ludo calls as Rhett reaches for the door, “but I’ve seen it in your eyes every time you look at me. I didn’t know what it meant, but I do now. I’ve haunted you for years, Brooks, and my death won’t change that.”

Rhett slams the door shut, his facade of calm disappearing instantly. While he stands there, Wren and I watch him. He takes a few deep breaths, his hand pressed against the metal.

“I won’t let him,” he says quietly after a minute.

“Won’t let him what?” Wren asks.

“I won’t let him haunt me.” When he turns, his expression is somber. “He’s taken enough from us. I won’t let him take our future, too.”

Wren steps toward him, intertwining their fingers. “We know.”

Watching them both, my heart warms. Multiple times, Ludo has tried to tear us apart, whether he knew it or not. We came out stronger each time. Now, we’ve truly made it out to the other side.

We have a long way to go. Even once we’ve killed Ludo, we each need to heal. But as I watch Wren and Rhett, I realize we’re on the right track. Holloway has consumed our lives for long enough, and we won’t let him have that power any longer.

I join them, taking Rhett’s other hand and kissing him lightly. We’ll forge new paths, and we’ll let the past fade. We’ll never forget Sammy, of course, but Ludo? Soon, he’ll only be a distant memory.

“We won’t let you, either,” I say, my gaze settling on him. “We’re with you, Rhett. Always have been.”

Wren smiles. “And always will be.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wren

Upstairs, Benny and Andrew are in the kitchen eating. Well, Andrew is eating, and Benny is holding a sandwich while talking to Oliver, who's trying to do the dishes.

"You're sure there aren't any secret tunnels? Old houses *always* have secret tunnels."

With a chuckle, Oliver turns the water off. "You know, we've checked, but maybe we missed them. We've got some stuff to do today, but I'm sure we can fit in some exploration time."

I smile. I've always figured that Oliver would be good with kids, and it looks like I'm right. Aside from Rhett, Benny is warming up to him the fastest.

Hearing us come in, Benny spins around and immediately dashes to Rhett's side. "Do you want to look for tunnels with us?"

"Sure, but let's wait until after lunch. Like Oliver said, we've got some stuff to do today."

“What stuff?” Benny asks. He’s bouncing on the balls of his feet, his eyes tracking Rhett’s every movement.

Elliot sighs. “Grocery shopping, for one. We’ve gotta get some food. And . . . just some work stuff,” he finishes.

I’m assuming that *work stuff* means Ludo’s first torture session.

“I can handle the groceries,” Rhett says, his fingers brushing down my arm. “You want to come with me?”

“Yeah, sure. Do you think we could stop by my apartment to get my jacket? It’s too warm for my winter coat.”

He nods. “We can grab whatever you need.”

Benny’s eyes zero in on Rhett. “Can I come?”

Shaking his head, Rhett squeezes his shoulder. “Not unless you want me to go to prison for kidnapping. You can’t go out in public yet.”

“Right,” he says, his posture slumping.

“We can do something when we get back. Looking for tunnels, exploring the woods, whatever you want.”

“All right.” Benny is trying not to sound too disappointed, but it’s not really working.

And honestly, it’s understandable. Not only has his whole life completely changed in the past month, but now he’s stuck in a huge house with nothing to do.

Well, that’s not *quite* true.

“I heard you like reading,” I say.

He nods.

“Do you want to take a look at my books before we go? I have a lot of fantasy.”

“Oh, yes please!”

I turn to Rhett. “We’ll just be a couple minutes.”

The smile on his face takes me by surprise. It’s full and bright—brighter than I’ve ever seen it.

“Take your time,” he says, leaning down to press a chaste kiss to my lips. “We’ve got all day.”

Andrew follows us up, although I’m not sure why. Maybe because he doesn’t want to get stuck in an awkward conversation with the guys. Or maybe because he wants something to read, too.

In my room, I pick out a few books that are targeted toward younger readers. Benny’s eyes widen at the art on the covers, and he immediately grabs them and starts reading the backs.

“Can I take this series? I’ve been wanting to read it for months.”

“Take as many as you want. Just be careful with them, please.”

“I will be, I promise.” Benny looks up at me and grins, hugging the books to his chest. “Thank you.”

He runs off, probably to find a cozy chair to curl up in. Andrew hesitates to follow, his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

“You want a book, too?”

“No, I . . .” He shifts uncomfortably before looking up to meet my gaze. “I guess I wanted to apologize.”

“You guess?” I do my best to keep the malice out of my voice, but it only helps so much.

Sure, I’m the one who got caught. But if Andrew had kept his damn mouth shut, the past few weeks would’ve unfolded *very* differently. The guys wouldn’t’ve been captured, and my heart wouldn’t feel like it’s been trampled on.

“No,” Andrew says. “I . . . I *am* sorry. I never should’ve trusted Ludo, and I never should’ve told him I saw you go into the billiard room.”

“You almost got all of us killed.” This time, I’m actually able to keep the anger out of my tone. I want Andrew to learn from this—to grow. Lecturing him won’t help, but he needs to understand what he did.

“I know. If I could take it back, I would.”

For a moment, we stand in silence. I’m not sure I can forgive him yet, especially since I don’t even know most of what happened while the guys were locked in Ludo’s mansion. From the looks of things, I’m not sure I ever will. However Oliver got those bruises, I don’t think he wants to talk about it.

Maybe one day, I can forgive Andrew. Maybe once Holloway is dead and the pain has faded. But for now, when everything is so fresh, when my mind is still terrified I’ll lose the guys again . . . I just can’t.

“Apology accepted,” I manage, and I mean it. I can acknowledge that he’s sorry without forgiving him.

“Thank you,” he mumbles. “I’ll . . . I’ll go.”

I give him a minute’s head start before grabbing a sweater and heading down. Part of me wonders if I’m being too harsh on Andrew. He’s young, and it’s not his fault that Ludo manipulated him. In a way, he’s a victim here, too.

That doesn’t excuse what he did, the angry, hurt side of me roars.

But no one ever taught him any better, the softer, more understanding side reminds me.

I shove both thoughts away as I walk through the kitchen to where Rhett is waiting for me in the mudroom. He seems more relaxed, which I’m

grateful for. Considering Ludo is *here,* so close to us, I was expecting Rhett to be on edge constantly. Instead, he seems relieved.

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me in for a quick kiss before we head into the garage. Every small touch brings me closer to stability, to trusting my own eyes and ears.

They're not going anywhere, my mind whispers. *Ludo will never hurt us again.*

. . .

Grocery shopping with Rhett is . . . nice. Before they were taken, we were just starting to figure out where to include me in things like chores. The guys already had a pretty established routine, but adding me wasn't too much trouble.

Still, I've never gone grocery shopping with one of them. Maybe it's silly that something as mundane as wandering through the store excites me, but it feels significant.

I'm also just happy to be doing *anything* with Rhett. I missed all of them so much, and my mind played out worst-case scenarios almost constantly. Getting to do the small life things, like grocery shopping or cleaning, were some of the things I realized we may never get to do together.

As we check out, Rhett watches me quietly. His gaze is as piercing as always, and not for the first time, I wonder if he can read my mind.

"I don't think I've ever seen someone so excited to be in a grocery store," he says.

Laughing, I load our bagged-up groceries back into the cart. "I'm just happy to have you back, that's all."

He catches my hand, holding it for a split second before letting go. “I’m glad to be back, sweetheart.”

In the parking lot, we load everything into the backseat. We have a cooler to put the cold foods in since the drive is long, and everything fits inside perfectly.

“Do you think Benny will want to go back to living with Corinne?” I ask once we’re heading toward my apartment. “You know, once Richard is dead?”

“I think so. Apparently, she’s pretty okay when Richard isn’t influencing her. I’d give almost anything to have more time with my mom.” Rhett’s voice falters, and he takes a breath before continuing. “I know it’s not the same, but I can’t imagine Benny wants to be separated from her. I think he just wanted to get away from Richard.”

Slowly, I nod. It makes sense. When my mom and I lived with my grandma, she wasn’t nearly as nasty toward me. It was only after she got together with Thomas that things changed.

I think Patricia always resented me some—she didn’t want to get pregnant, and she lost my dad because of me. When Thomas came along, he reminded her of the life she could’ve had. He made it seem attainable again, except that I still existed. I was a constant burden to her, and he had no problem reminding me of that.

Still, before Thomas came along, I never would’ve wanted to be without her. That’s different now, of course. Even if something happened to him and I got the chance to rebuild with Patricia, I don’t think I would. We’ve changed too much. At this point, she’s broken my trust so thoroughly that no amount of apologizing would ever be enough.

“You okay?” One of Rhett’s hands drops from the steering wheel, covering my own where it’s resting on his thigh. “You went somewhere else for a bit.”

“I was just thinking about my mom,” I say softly, shaking my head to clear my thoughts. “Will you ever tell Benny the truth about Richard’s death? That it wasn’t suicide?”

“Once he’s older,” Rhett replies. “As long as he turns out okay, that is, but he will. I’ll make sure of it.”

“How will that work?”

“I’m not sure, honestly. My plan is to use Richard’s death as an excuse to insert myself into the family. Like, I saw his obituary by chance, and it made me realize he had another family. I’ll give them some time to adjust to being back, of course.

“Then I’ll just . . . show up, I guess. I’m not sure what Corinne thinks of me, and she might not want to let me get close to the boys. They’ll have to pretend they don’t know who I am, but as long as they express that they want to get to know me, I’m hoping she’ll give in.”

“Maybe she’ll want to let you into their lives,” I say. “Even if it’s just because she’ll feel bad for the boys because they just lost their father.”

“I’m hoping that’s her thought process.” Rhett presses his lips together, like he’s unsure if he should go on, but then he sighs. “If she’s not welcoming, I’m not sure I’ll care, though. I’ve already lost one sibling. I’m not losing two more.”

“You won’t,” I tell him. “They’ll fight for you, too. I’ve barely spent time with Benny, but it’s obvious he adores you. Andrew . . . I think he’s trying.”

Rhett sighs. “I don’t know what to do with him.”

“I think the only thing you really can do is give him time,” I say quietly. “I’m not sure what to think of him, but I know what it’s like to be manipulated, and so do you. He almost ruined us, and some days when I was all alone with Finn, I hated him. But you’ve said it yourself. He’s still a kid.”

“He is,” Rhett replies, his expression pensive as he turns into the parking lot of my apartment building.

Gently, I squeeze his thigh. “I can’t say I like him, but I’m not discounting him as a person, either. He’ll have to earn my trust, but . . .”

“Trust goes both ways,” Rhett finishes for me.

I nod. To give Andrew a chance, we need to show that he can give us a chance, too. Sure, we got him and Benny away from Ludo, but Andrew doesn’t fully know our intentions. As far as I know, he’s still entirely unaware that Holloway is the reason Sammy is dead.

Just as Rhett pulls into a parking spot, his phone rings. “It’s Finn,” he says with a frown. “I have to take this.”

Unbuckling my seatbelt, I lean over the console and kiss his cheek. This is a conversation we don’t want anyone to overhear. “I’ll just run up real quick. Be back in a couple minutes.”

He nods, taking the call and pressing his phone to his ear.

It feels weird being back in my apartment building. In the elevator, I twist my keys around their ring. I feel like a completely different person than who I was the last time I was here.

I frown. *The last time I was here.*

At some point, I slowly began to remember the events of my kidnapping. There was a man—his face is still a blur—and then I cut him with a knife, but it wasn’t enough.

I gulp, wondering if there's still blood in the kitchen. Will being in the apartment freak me out? God, I hope not. I have enough shit haunting me as it is.

Still, my steps are slow as I walk down the hallway to my apartment. I'm half hoping Rhett will catch up with me, even though I know his conversation with Finn will probably take a while.

You're fine, I chide myself. *You can handle this.*

And I can. After all I've been through in the past couple months, walking into my apartment will be child's play.

I insert the key into the lock and turn it, taking one last deep breath before pushing it open. Instantly, I freeze.

The lights are on. Fresh fruit sits on the kitchen counter, unfamiliar shoes are by the door, and one of the windows is slightly open.

My mom stands from the couch, quickly followed by Thomas. My chest squeezes as I grip the doorframe. I think it's the only thing keeping me upright.

"Mom? What're you doing here? And why . . ." My gaze flicks to Thomas. "Why is he here?"

"You haven't answered your phone in weeks!" She rounds the couch, her arms wide open as she steps toward me.

Does she *actually* think I want to hug her? I knock her arms away once she's close enough.

"Seriously?" she asks. She sounds hurt, but I can't find it in me to care.

"What're you doing *here?"* I ask again. "In my apartment."

"How else was I supposed to make sure you were okay?" she asks. "You haven't been answering my calls, and when I went to the coffee shop, your

coworker told me you quit! This was the only way I knew how to contact you."

My fingernails dig into the wood of the doorframe. "How long have you been staying here?"

My mom glances at Thomas. "About a week?"

"And why is *he* here?" I grit out.

At that, Thomas steps forward. He raises himself to his full height and crosses his arms over his chest—his go-to intimidation tactic. "Am I not allowed to be worried about my daughter?"

"*Step*daughter," I snap. "And you can be worried from afar. Get the fuck out of my apartment."

"Not until you talk to your mother." He makes his voice deeper than it usually is. "You've been disrespectful enough."

"*I've* been disrespectful? I'll treat her with respect when she stops trampling over my boundaries. Now get out."

"No." Thomas steps forward and yanks me into the apartment. "You need to—*fuck!*"

I kick him in the shins as hard as I can, jerking my arm free of his grasp.

"Wren!" Patricia gasps. "Don't hurt him!"

Fury flares inside me, bright and white-hot. Even now, after *he's* the one who made things physical, my mom still sees me as the one in the wrong. I barely have time to dwell on it.

Thomas straightens, the pain on his features morphing into anger. "You little—"

He reaches for me, and I'm just able to twist out of his reach. I grab a photo frame and fling it at his face. This is different than the sessions with

Rhett in the gym. Everything is moving faster, and panicked thoughts are racing through my head.

The look in his eyes—it's the same one they held right before he threw me down the stairs all those years ago.

You've killed two men, I remind myself. *You can handle your stepfather.*

But Thomas is advancing toward me fast, his hand curled into a fist. The only reason I was able to kill those men is because I took one by surprise and the other was restrained.

So I do the only thing I can—I run. I've always been fast on my feet, and I have to hope that Thomas's age has gotten the better of him. I dash down the hallway, hearing Thomas's footsteps pounding behind me.

"Wren," my mom cries from the doorway. "Stop! He won't hurt you."

But it's a lie—a lie she's been telling herself for far too many years.

I don't have time to wait for the elevator, so I shove the stairwell door open and dive down the stairs. Thomas is right behind me—gaining on me, I think—but I don't dare look back.

My panic rises at being in the stairwell with Thomas again. My entire body is screaming at me that this is a bad idea, but what else am I supposed to do?

I reach the first landing and barrel toward the next flight of stairs. But just as I'm about to take the first step down, Thomas grabs my hair and yanks me back.

"No!" I scratch at his arms, desperate to break free.

He slams me against the wall, and pain explodes at the base of my skull. "What the fuck did you think you were going to accomplish by running? Stop acting like a child, Wren."

Not again. Oh my god, not again.

“Let—let go of me!” I shove against him, wracking my brain for how to get out of this position.

“Then come back to the apartment,” Thomas says menacingly, “unless you want a repeat of the last time we were in here.”

“No,” I screech. We’re right by the stairs. One simple shove, and he’d send me tumbling down.

Rhett never taught me what to do if someone pinned me against a wall, but he still taught me plenty. Use your surroundings to your advantage. Throw off your opponent’s balance. Use your own weight against them.

“I’m not above dragging you back.”

I don’t respond, focusing all of my energy on getting the hell away from Thomas. Gritting my teeth, I slam my knee into his crotch, watching his eyes go wide with pain. He lets go of me, doubling over, and I scramble free.

“You fucking *bitch,*” he groans. “You’ll pay for this.”

“Wren?” I hear Rhett call, his voice echoing from below, but it barely registers in my mind.

Thomas is already straightening. Before he can take another step toward me, though, I realize I have an opening. A chance to repay him for what he did to me.

I don’t think about it—I just move. With all my strength, I shove Thomas backward—right down the stairs. His arms flail as he tries to catch himself but fails. I cringe when his head hits the concrete with a sickening sound.

“Wren!” Rhett’s voice is louder now, and I realize he’s on the landing below—the one that my stepfather just rolled onto. He ignores Thomas’s body, jumping over it and taking the stairs two at a time. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“He—he . . .” I blink, staring up at him when he grabs my shoulders. His touch is gentle and comforting, a welcome contrast to the rough way Thomas handled me.

“Christ, sweetheart, you’re shaking.” Rhett’s arms envelop me, and I press my face into his chest, breathing in his calming scent.

“I didn’t know they were here,” I say weakly.

“They? Who is he?” He glances down at Thomas, who’s just beginning to stir. Recognition flickers over Rhett’s face. “That’s him, isn’t it?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Is your mom here, too?”

I nod. “She didn’t follow.”

“Follow?” Rhett frowns.

“I . . . I ran. Thomas chased after me.”

“You’re okay?”

Nodding again, I gingerly touch the back of my head. It stings, and I wince. “Mostly.”

From below, Thomas groans and does his best to sit up. I’m pretty sure he was unconscious for a few seconds, so I bet he has one hell of a concussion. Rhett turns his attention toward Thomas, holding onto me for another second before stalking down the stairs.

I lean against the wall, watching as Rhett grabs the collar of Thomas’s shirt and hauls him into a sitting position.

“What happened?” he demands.

Thomas grimaces at his harsh tone. His head slowly turns until he’s looking at me. “She . . .”

“No,” Rhett spits out. “*You.* You fell, all on your own.”

“No . . . no, she . . .”

“You fell.” Rhett hoists Thomas up, drags him to the next flight of stairs, and throws him down it. “And that was you falling again.”

“Rhett!” I fly down the steps and grab his arm when he moves to follow Thomas. “Don’t.”

Thomas manages to lift himself up enough that he can lean against the wall. His shirt is stained with blood.

“He deserves worse,” Rhett growls.

“Not if we’re going to get away with it.” I tug on his arm, pulling him back as a door opens a few flights above. Lowering my voice, I say, “If he’s too badly hurt, no one will believe it was an accident.”

“Wren?” my mom calls. “Thomas?”

“We’re down here,” I yell back. “Come quick! He fell down the stairs.”

As Patricia descends, Rhett and I make our way down to Thomas. He kneels, leaning in close.

“You fell, you bastard. Unless you want me to haunt you for the rest of your miserable life.”

Thomas whimpers, shakily nodding.

“How did you know where I was?” I ask Rhett.

“I was waiting for the elevator when I heard you yelling in the stairwell,” he says just as my mom comes into view. “I—”

“Thomas!” Patricia shrieks. She runs down the last set of stairs and drops to her knees in front of him. “Oh my god!”

“He hit his head,” I say, not having to feign the way my voice trembles. Thomas scared the shit out of me.

“What happened?” she demands. “Look at him! His arm!”

For the first time, I spend more than a split second staring at Thomas. His one arm is bent at an unnatural angle. Fucking bastard deserves it.

“This came from a *fall?*” Patricia stands, whirling to face me. “Wren, if you’re lying to me—if this was some petty revenge—”

“That’s enough,” Thomas rasps.

“But—”

“No,” he snaps, wincing from the force of it. “I just tripped. You think Wren could get the best of me in a fight? Come on, Patricia, just look at her.”

My mind rages to say otherwise, to prove him wrong, but I keep quiet. There’s a reason my mother accused me of being petty—because *she* is. She’ll call the police on her own daughter even though she knows damn well that what I did was in self-defense.

Mostly.

“I’d say he needs an ambulance,” Rhett says. “I’d know. My dad’s a doctor.”

My mom pulls out her phone and dials 911 while I back away. Rhett follows me, placing a protective hand on my hip.

“What do you want to do?” he murmurs.

“I want to get out of here.” Once Patricia is off the phone, I tell her, “I’m packing your things, and I’ll leave them with the front desk. You’re not welcome here.”

“Wren! Seriously? Look at Thomas, he probably has a concussion!”

“You can stay in a hotel,” I say dryly. “I don’t ever want to see either of you again.”

Patricia looks like I just slapped her, but how can she not understand? How can she tell me to not kick Thomas after he yanked me around like I was a doll? And why would she think this is petty revenge instead of making sure he doesn’t hurt me again?

I turn away, not letting her watch my expression as my brain so kindly reminds me that this *was* partially revenge. It wasn't my main reason for pushing Thomas, nor was it petty, but she's a little bit right.

"Wren, I—"

"Go," I say, my voice flat and void of emotion. I don't turn to face her. "You two deserve each other."

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Oliver

“Princess!” I sweep Wren into my arms the second she steps into the kitchen.

“I’m okay,” she says, but the strain in her voice tells me otherwise.

Wren texted me and Ell on their way back from her apartment and let us know her stepdad attacked her. For the most part, Wren seems unfazed, but I think Thomas managed to scare her pretty good.

I cradle her head gently, but she hisses in pain and pulls away. “Oh, not there. That hurts.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“What happened, love?” Elliot comes up behind her, gently parting her hair. “It doesn’t look like you’re bleeding.”

“Rhett already checked,” she says. “Thomas slammed me against a wall. Well, first he grabbed me and yanked me into the apartment. And then I think he was about to punch me, so I ran. He caught up to me in the stairwell.”

“Which is where she managed to get the better of him,” Rhett adds. “Pushed him down a flight of stairs.”

Wren hugs me tightly and lays her head on my shoulder. “And then Rhett threw him down another.”

Letting out a low whistle, Elliot strokes Wren’s back. “You’re okay otherwise?”

“Just shaken up. I told my mom I never want to see either of them again.”

“Where were you?” I ask Rhett.

“On the phone with Finn. It was a stroke of luck I heard her yelling.” His lips curve upward to form a proud smirk. “Not that she needed my help.”

I nod. It’s not like they expected someone to be in Wren’s apartment. “What did he have to say?”

“He hacked into Richard and Corinne’s calendars. She’s going to be gone tomorrow night, and it looks like he’ll be home alone. Finn is working on learning everything he can about the house’s security system as we speak.”

“So . . . tomorrow night.”

Rhett nods. “I don’t want to wait any longer.”

“Fair enough.”

Just then, Benny dashes into the room. The kid has so much energy I’m contemplating asking Finn if he can bring Maggie over here for a day. Maybe the two of them will wear each other out.

“Tunnels?” he asks, eyes bright with excitement.

Rhett chuckles. “Tunnels.”

. . .

To no one’s surprise—and Benny’s disappointment—we don’t find any secret tunnels. He *does* find the door to the second basement, though, but

it’s locked, and we told him to not go down there. Even if he manages to, there’s no way he can get to Ludo.

Halfway through, Wren heads to her room to lie down, saying she has a headache. Elliot heads up to check on her after a half hour. We already asked if she wants to get her head checked out by a doctor, but she declined, saying she can probably sleep it off.

Benny already discovered the game room the other day, so he drags us all in there, and we play a game of pool. It’s been a while since we’ve spent much time in here. To say life has been hectic lately would be an understatement.

“Another round?” Benny asks once the two of us have beat Andrew and Rhett.

Andrew grabs his cue. “Absolutely. You only won because you got lucky.”

“You two play,” Rhett says, stepping back. “I think I’m too tired to keep up.”

“You already weren’t keeping up,” I tease, which earns me a playful jab to my ribs.

“Will you two be good on your own for a while?” Rhett asks as Benny and Andrew start gathering up the balls again.

“We’ll be fine,” Andrew says.

“All right. Elliot is in Wren’s room if you need anything.”

“Best two out of three?” Andrew asks.

Benny grins. “Hell yeah.”

“That first one doesn’t count, though,” Andrew says.

“Aww, but—”

“We’re starting from scratch, Ben.”

“Ugh, we always play your way! Why can’t we play my way?”

As Rhett and I leave, I chuckle. Maria and I used to bicker like that all the time. Still do sometimes, if I’m being honest.

“Is there anything you were planning on doing today?” Rhett asks me as we walk through the house.

“Just spend time with everyone. Relax, rest, all that.” *And do my best not to think of Ludo.*

“Got it.”

I stop, realizing what he probably wants to do. “You’re heading to the basement, aren’t you?”

“He can wait another day,” Rhett says.

I frown. “You’re sure?”

“It’s not like he’s having a great time down there. Pretty sure he has at least a broken rib and a minor concussion. Plus, the wait is torture enough.”

“You can say that again,” I mutter, realizing too late that it’s a mistake.

Rhett watches me quietly, almost expectantly. Unable to hold his gaze, I look away.

“What happened while we were separated?”

My eyes slide shut, and I shake my head. I just *can’t.*

“O,” Rhett says softly, “what did he do to you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Can you just . . . ask Ell?”

A shadow crosses over Rhett’s face before he takes my hand in both of his. “Yeah, of course.”

It’s probably unfair of me to put the burden of explaining on Elliot. It was painful for him, too, but I know he’ll do it for me. Maybe taking it off my shoulders will ease some of the guilt I know he’s feeling, too.

“I just want to forget,” I whisper.

Silently, he tugs on my hand and leads me upstairs. Just as we get to Rhett's room, Wren's door opens, and Elliot steps out.

"Hey. How's she doing?" I ask.

"All right. She hasn't fallen asleep yet, but she's getting there. I've been reading to her, and I think it's helping."

Rhett leans against his doorframe. "You two need anything?"

"Water, but I've got it."

Nodding, Rhett says, "I told the boys to find you if they need something."

"Good to know." Elliot's eyes travel from Rhett to me. "Maybe just try to keep it down? I don't think turning Wren on right now would be a good idea."

"Absolutely." Rhett nudges me toward his room. "We can be quiet."

"Thanks." Elliot turns to head down the hallway, but then he pauses. That haunted look returns to his eyes, and he reaches out and brushes his fingers down my arm. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. I know what he means.

In Rhett's room, he shuts the door behind us.

"Are you seducing me?" I ask, feeling his gaze boring into me from behind.

"I'm reminding you who you belong to," he replies, gripping the back of my neck and guiding me toward the bed. "And that no one is ever taking you from me again."

Desire spreads through my body, lazy and warm. Once we're in front of the bed, Rhett's hand glides down my spine, coming to rest at the small of my back. His lips brush against the side of my neck, his warm breath skating across my skin and making me shiver.

"Do you want that?" he murmurs lowly in my ear.

Want isn’t a strong enough word to describe the way I feel. I don’t think there *is* a word with a meaning that fully encapsulates it.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Don’t move.”

I stand perfectly still, feeling the loss of Rhett’s body heat behind me. He goes through one of his drawers until I hear him pull a few things out.

“Close your eyes,” he tells me.

Without hesitation, I do so. I can hear him moving and feel his breath on my skin again. His fingers brush against my hips before he lifts my shirt over my head and lets it drop to the floor.

Next, there’s the familiar feeling of cool leather against my neck. Rhett doesn’t pull out the collar very often, but it always helps me relax. There’s a certain sense of security that comes with wearing it—a type of freedom in knowing that I don’t have to think when it’s on. As Rhett fastens it, I smile. I’ll never stop being grateful that I found three people who understand me and want to give me what I need.

Rhett chuckles, pulling his hands away. “Do you have any idea what you just did?”

“What? No.” I almost open my eyes but stop myself just in time.

“You completely relaxed. Pretty sure your shoulders dropped a whole inch. Maybe even two.”

I hum. Maybe I need this more than I realize.

Rhett’s hands squeeze my hips before he slides my pants and briefs down my legs. Once I’ve stepped out of them, he reaches around me and strokes my cock once, twice, before pulling away. I bite my lip to stop myself from begging for more.

“Turn around and face me,” Rhett says.

Slowly, I do.

“Open your eyes.”

He’s smiling at me, his expression soft. “Take off my shirt.”

Stepping close to him, I reach for him, my fingers curling around the black fabric. I pull it up, and he lifts his arms so I can get it over his head. As I do, I press small kisses to his chest and shoulders, unable to stop myself.

He picks up a length of chain from his bedside table and attaches it to the metal ring on the front of my collar. Gently, he tugs, and I have no choice but to step forward.

His smirk is wide, his eyes dark. “Good boy. Now undo my pants.”

I reach for him, but he shakes his head.

“On your knees.”

As I lower myself to the floor, I trail my hands down his thighs. He’s towering above me and holding onto my leash, and it makes my stomach flip with excitement. When we’re like this, I can breathe easier. Rhett will take care of every need I have, so this acts as a temporary reprieve from my anxiety.

Slowly, I unbutton his pants and slide the zipper down. The whole time, I stare up at him, watching as his eyes grow even darker with want. When I pull his pants down, taking his briefs too, he steps out of them.

“Good boy,” he tells me lowly.

My eyes are on his cock. I reach for it without permission, wrapping my fingers around it and moving my hand up and down. His dick hardens under my touch, and he lets out a satisfied sigh.

“I had other plans, but . . .” He slides his hand up the chain so I can only move a couple inches, and then he gently pulls me closer. “This is fine for

now.”

With a groan, I lick the underside of his cock from base to tip before taking it into my mouth. I suck on the head and stroke with my hand, falling into a pattern I know he likes.

Rhett groans, staring down at me as I pick up my pace. I’ve missed his taste—missed the way he feels in my mouth. But more than that, I’ve missed the way he can never take his eyes off me when we’re together.

“You feel so goddamn good, O.” As he says it, Rhett strokes his free hand over my hair and cups the back of my head. He thrusts into my mouth, holding me to him. “Fuck.”

As he drives into my mouth, I caress his dick with my tongue. He’s not too rough, but it’s controlling enough that I wouldn’t be able to pull away if I wanted to. It’s exactly what I like, and I grip the back of one of his thighs, silently urging him on.

“Sometimes, you’re just as greedy as Wren,” he says. “I bet you’re rock hard right now, aren’t you? Bet you want me to suck your cock the way you’re sucking mine.”

I moan and move my hand more enthusiastically, following with my mouth. I’ll always enjoy having all my attention on him, but god, I want him to touch me, too.

Holding my head in place, Rhett pulls out of my mouth. When I look up at him, his eyes are half-closed, a lazy smile on his face.

“Up,” he tells me.

I scramble to my feet, grinning when he tugs me toward the bed using the leash. With a heated gaze, Rhett tugs it again until I’m stumbling into him. His hand cups my cheek before gripping my chin and tipping my face up.

“I love that you have no choice but to obey me,” he says, tightening his hold on the leash. “I can do whatever I want to you, and you just have to take it.”

An unbidden whimper escapes me just as Rhett fits his mouth to mine. He holds me in place, one hand keeping the length of chain tight, the other gripping the hair at the back of my head. When his tongue delves into my mouth, I suck on it, craning my neck upward. I don’t want him to pull away.

He does, though, spitting into my open mouth and watching as I swallow. When he leans in again, his lips brush over my cheekbone, and then he nips at my earlobe. “Mine,” he says, his voice almost a growl. “You’re fucking mine, O.”

“Always,” I whisper.

As Rhett crawls onto the bed, he pulls me with him. He lies down on his back, his head propped up on the pillows, and he guides me so I’m straddling him. Once I’m in position, my dick rubs against his. I begin wrapping my fingers around both of them, but Rhett knocks my hand away.

“Grab the lube,” he instructs.

It’s already sitting on his nightstand, so I snatch it up instantly. Still holding onto my leash with one hand, Rhett uses the other to take hold of my cock. His hand moves up and down as I groan at his touch.

“Squirt some on.”

I do, shivering at the contrast between the heat of Rhett’s hand and the coolness of the lube. The liquid warms quickly, and I watch his fingers glide over my cock with ease. His grip is firm but not too tight, his strokes even.

As a sigh escapes me, I tilt my head back slightly and close my eyes. The only things I want to focus on are the feelings of Rhett’s body against mine

and the sensations of his hand sliding over my cock.

“Rhett,” I moan, reaching out and running my fingers along his arm.

For the briefest second, he stops, moving to wrap his hand around both our dicks. “More,” he says.

I squirt more lube onto our cocks, and it spreads as he strokes them together. Another whimper falls from my lips as he picks up his pace. Feeling the soft skin of our dicks rubbing against each other is its own type of heaven.

“So good,” I groan.

He’s still holding onto my leash with his free hand, keeping it taut between us. As he continues stroking, I sink into that familiar space of safety and bliss.

No one can hurt me.

No one can take me away.

No one can touch me but him.

I think Rhett notices, because he tugs on the chain gently. It’s not enough to force me forward more because that’s not his intention.

“I’m yours,” I whisper, my gaze traveling from his hand, up his body, to his eyes, which are locked on me. “I love you, Rhett.”

His smile is slow, and relief fills his expression, although I’m not sure why. “I love you, too.”

He lets go of our cocks, and I take over. Using both of my hands, I wrap my fingers around our dicks and stroke up and down. I watch with satisfaction as Rhett’s eyes close, and he relaxes into the mattress beneath us. Over the past couple months, I’ve started to notice him letting his guard down more often. Hopefully, that continues.

I slide one of my hands up farther, caressing the heads of our cocks and smearing the precum that's waiting at the tips. I move back down before repeating the process. It feels good, so I keep at it, watching Rhett's lips part from a breathless groan.

"I'm gonna come," I gasp.

He grabs my hand and pulls it away, and a disappointed whimper falls from my lips.

"Rhett—"

"Not yet. Edge yourself until I'm there with you. We're coming together."

Oh, fuck. He knows I love that—we both do.

I continue stroking Rhett's cock, giving myself a moment of rest. Once I've put some distance between me and my impending orgasm, I take both our dicks in my hands again. I thrust into them, moaning at the feeling of my cock rubbing against Rhett's.

"Such a good boy," he tells me. "I love it when you obey me."

"You're trying to make this harder on me, aren't you?" I almost let myself get too close, but while I want to come, I want Rhett to be proud of me. So I let go of my cock again and go back to only stroking his.

"That's it. Oh, fuck, Oliver, just like that."

I go for a little longer before I join again. I thrust into my hand, squeezing gently so that it's tighter and there's more friction against our dicks. As I feel myself getting close again, I groan. How am I supposed to stop? My body is tense from the buildup and denial, and I need this. *God*, I need this.

"Rhett, I—"

"It's okay. Let go. I'm gonna come, too."

"Oh, *fuck.*" As the sensations wash over me, I let myself get lost in them—in being completely wrapped up in Rhett. In *us.* Nothing can compare to

it, especially when he has me collared and he's looking at me with that possessive heat in his eyes.

Rhett chokes out a groan as cum shoots from his dick. I bite my bottom lip to stifle my whimpers, not wanting to distract Wren. My cum coats the back of my hand, and I slow my strokes on instinct. It's too much.

"Don't stop," Rhett commands me. "Keep going. I know you can take it."

I do as he says, shuddering at the heightened sensations. I'm so sensitive, and hearing the tightness is his voice and knowing he's feeling the same things I am only adds to it.

"Rhett," I rasp, half wondering if I'm going to explode from the overstimulation. "Ahh, *ahhh,* I don't think I can—"

His hand covers mine gently as he gives me silent permission to stop. My hand slows, and as my vision clears, I find him smiling up at me.

"You did so well," he whispers. "I'm proud of you for listening."

With an exhausted groan, I let myself collapse on top of him and fit my mouth to his. My lips move against his clumsily as I try to express just how much this means to me.

Rhett unhooks the leash and sets it on the bedside table. I'm about to head to the bathroom to clean up, but he pulls me into him.

"Just a few minutes," he murmurs. "Let me hold you."

Resting my head on his chest, I let out a content sigh. My hand is all sticky, but I don't mind if it means I get to cuddle with Rhett for a few minutes.

His fingers trace over my bruises lightly, but he doesn't pry. At some point, he'll need to know what happened, but not now.

"You'll be okay," he tells me softly, his voice laced with pain and regret. "We're here for you no matter what, O."

His gentle assurance dispels the memories that are creeping into my consciousness. I relax into his hold, yet again appreciating the reminder that I'm safe.

Rhett is right. I *will* be okay. We all will be. It'll take time, but we have support. And most importantly, we won't let something like this happen ever again.

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Chapter Thirty

Elliot

My hand travels up and down Wren's arm as I watch her chest rise and fall. Getting the message in our group chat that Thomas attacked her was the last thing I expected. It scared the shit out of me. Even now, I have to fight the urge to hunt him down and kill him—not just because he hurt her, but so he never has the chance to again.

But it's not my call to make, and I don't think Wren wants to kill her stepfather. Never see him again? Of course. But I don't think she'll agree that he deserves to die.

A closed book sits in my lap. I'm not sure how much Wren remembers of the last couple chapters I read. After her breathing evened out, I kept reading, not sure if she was fully asleep yet. I only stopped fifteen minutes ago.

Leaning down carefully, I plant a soft kiss on her forehead. She moans and rolls over to face me, her hand coming to rest on my thigh.

If I still had doubts about Wren, the last couple days would've erased them completely. She and Finn worked nonstop to come up with a way to

get us out of Ludo's grasp. If it wasn't for her, we'd still be locked up—or dead.

Not that I still *do* have doubts about her. I haven't for a long while. Even in the beginning, my issues were with our lifestyle, not her. I didn't want to see her get hurt. Even though we failed to protect her, I couldn't imagine life without Wren.

I'm not sure how we're going to break it to her what Ludo did to Oliver. Or to me, I suppose. Every time I close my eyes, I see the woman I killed—the one who reminded me of Wren. The second I was able to, I looked her up. She seemed perfectly ordinary, unlike her husband, who used to work for Holloway.

If I had to guess, I'd say Ludo wanted her dead as payback. It looks like her husband betrayed him, and Holloway always gets creative with his punishments. She didn't seem involved in her husband's business, and they seemed to love each other a lot. God, I'm just glad they never had kids.

I should've found another way.

But deep down, I know there's no way I could've. At that point, I didn't know I could trust Axel, and we had no way out. But I can't get around the fact that she's dead because of *me*. I know I didn't have much of a choice, but I don't think she'll ever stop haunting me.

And Wren . . . I know she'll think it's her fault. She already does. She's wrong, but how can we convince her of that? Once guilt takes root, it's almost impossible to expel it completely.

"It wasn't your fault, love," I whisper.

I stay for another fifteen minutes before slowly moving her hand to the mattress. If I could lie down and sleep with her, I would, but I want to check on the boys. We need to figure out what to do for dinner, anyway.

Before I leave, I give Wren one last look. I'm familiar enough with how to take care of someone with a concussion thanks to a backflip gone wrong years ago—not that I think Wren has one. She's not showing most symptoms, but we'll still wake her up in a couple hours to see how she's doing.

Downstairs, Andrew and Benny are in the kitchen eating what appears to be some type of soup. There's fresh bread on the counter that's cut into thick slices.

"Hey," Andrew says. "Meredith dropped by. She said that's for you." He nods to a long, thin box sitting on the island.

"Thanks." Tucking it under my arm, I gesture to the two bowls on the table. "I was gonna ask if you guys are hungry, but . . ."

"Meredith brought dinner," Benny says, his mouth full of food. "Said to call her if we need anything."

The thought tugs on my heartstrings. *Of course she did.* Meredith has always been so supportive, so respectful. I know she wants to help and be there for us, but she also wants to give us space if that's what we need.

As for the package, I'm glad she got it to me so quickly. I could've ordered one, but I was hoping that asking Meredith to pick one up for me would be faster.

She didn't even bat an eye at my request. I didn't tell her why I need it, but I think she put the pieces together. Not only is Meredith one of the strongest people I know, but she's also one of the smartest.

"What is it?" Benny asks, his eyes on the package.

Rolling his eyes, Andrew knocks his brother in the shoulder. "Had to stop him from opening it."

Benny just grins, watching me expectantly.

“A secret,” I say. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Awww, come on! All everyone is doing is keeping secrets.”

“Rhett will explain things to you soon,” I tell him. “He just needs a little time.”

Benny flops into his chair dramatically. “I wish time would go by faster.”

“I used to say that all the time. My mom always told me the opposite is true when you grow up.” To this day, I’m not sure how she can be so correct but so wrong at the same time.

“My mom says that, too.” Benny’s face falls, like he’s just remembering that she exists. “I feel bad making her worry about us.”

“Have you thought about what we talked about?” Andrew asks.

“I told you! I don’t want to see Dad anymore. He scares me.”

“And *I* told you, what if Dad wasn’t in the picture?”

Throwing his hands up in the air, Benny glares at Andrew. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Andrew and I exchange a quick glance that, thankfully, Benny doesn’t seem to notice. Rhett mentioned the conversation he had with Andrew earlier. He didn’t admit anything, but the implication is clear—to Andrew, anyway.

“Are they getting divorced?” Benny asks hopefully.

“Maybe,” Andrew replies. “If they did, and Mom could get sole custody of you, would you be okay with that?”

“Yeah,” Benny says. Then he adds softly, “I miss her. I don’t want her to be sad that I’m gone.”

“Maybe we can work something out.” I give him a reassuring smile.

Just then, Rhett walks in, his hand clasped in Oliver’s. Both of them look more relaxed than when I ran into them upstairs.

“What’s in there?” Oliver asks.

My jaw tightens as he eyes the package. When he reaches for it, I shy away.

“Ell! Come on, you never keep secrets. What are you doing?”

“Making things right,” I say, grateful when Rhett holds Oliver back. “I’ll be up in time to wake Wren.”

The hurt on Oliver’s face only makes my chest squeeze tighter, but it’s better this way. He wasn’t supposed to know this package even exists.

“I love you, O,” I tell him. “Just . . . trust me.”

He crosses his arms, but he nods. “Fine.”

“Your mom brought soup. Eat. I’ll get some when I come back up.”

I don’t open the package until I’m downstairs, just outside the door to Ludo’s cell. The boys would only ask more questions, and it would be cruel to pull it out in front of Oliver.

Taking a deep breath, I open the box. It’s a more modern design than the one Ludo has, but I don’t think that matters. It should get the job done perfectly.

I’m just barely able to hear laughter from upstairs. Once I’m inside Ludo’s cell, that’ll change. We soundproofed it a while back so that Holloway’s cries for help wouldn’t bug us. It’s extra helpful now that we don’t want Benny to know what we’re doing to Ludo.

After I type the passcode into the keypad, I insert the key to unlock the door. Just before I open it, my grip on the cattle prod tightens.

I can’t take back my mistakes, but I can do my best to make up for them. This is the first step of many.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Wren

I’m not sure what wakes me up—the terror of being chased through the house or the sound of my bedroom door opening. I bolt upright, yelping when I see his silhouette lit by the dim lights in the hallway.

He’s holding something.

Something big.

It’s a weapon.

“Wren? What’s wrong?”

Throwing back the covers, I scramble away from him. And then I’m falling, crashing to the floor. My ass hits the ground, and my shoulder knocks into my nightstand, sending pain ricocheting down my arm.

“Fuck—sweetheart, it’s okay.”

Light floods the room, and I hold up a hand to shield my eyes. “Rhett?”

Rhett. Not him.

There’s a light thud, and then he rounds the bed and drops to his knees beside me. His touch is gentle as he eases an arm around me.

“Are you hurt? Did you hit your head?”

“No, I . . . I’m fine.” *I think.*

“What happened?” he asks.

“He chased us,” I mumble, rubbing my eyes. Getting up so quickly has me disoriented. “He was killing us off one by one, and I was hiding in here, and then the door opened, and I . . .”

“Hey. It was just a dream.” Rhett works an arm around me, coaxing me out of the corner I realize I squeezed myself into. “Thomas can’t get to you here.”

Even as my anxiety fades, I find myself shaking my head. “What? No, not Thomas. I meant Ludo.”

That causes Rhett to completely freeze. He stares at me, his arm still around my back and holding me up.

Almost immediately, I realize I should’ve let him believe otherwise. “No—no, it’s fine. I know he’s locked up. *And* chained up. It’s just my anxiety. I know he can’t get to us. Please don’t kill him—not until you’re ready.”

But Rhett shakes his head, his expression set. His mind is made up.

I grab his arm when he moves to stand, holding on as tightly as I can. “No! Rhett, I’m begging you. I don’t want to be the reason you do something you end up regretting.”

“Protecting you will *never* be something I regret.” He says it so fiercely, a direct contrast to how he lowers himself back to the floor and caresses my face. “Just stay here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

This time, he slips away before I can grab him again. I get up as quickly as I can. Now that I’ve had a couple minutes awake, I’m not nearly as unsteady on my feet. My head still hurts like a bitch, but I’m not dizzy or anything.

I dash for the door, only realizing once I'm out in the hallway that I'm not fully clothed. With a groan, I turn back, grabbing some pants from my dresser. As I do, I notice what's on top.

What Rhett was holding wasn't a weapon, and it isn't big at all. It's a plate, holding a few slices of bread and a steaming bowl of soup. My heart melts at the gesture, but I barely have time to think about it.

"Rhett," I call as I run through the house. "Rhett, wait!"

But he's already too far ahead. I have to take the stairs at a normal pace, too afraid I'll lose my balance and fall down them. By the time I'm at the door to the second basement, my heart is pounding rapidly.

I throw the door open, and my stomach drops when I don't see Rhett. As I descend, I look around, but he isn't down here. The light is on, though, which means he's already in the cell.

Even though I know he won't hear, I pound on the door. "Rhett! Rhett, don't!"

After a few seconds, the door swings open, and I'm immediately hit by the sound of screams. I stumble backward, staring at Rhett as he steps out of the cell and shuts the door. Immediately, the screams stop, silenced completely by the soundproofing inside.

Screams. Ludo is alive. Thank fuck, he's alive.

Rhett is holding a sledgehammer in one hand. As he takes me in, his hard expression softens.

"What did you do?" I whisper.

"He'll never walk again." He drops the sledgehammer to the floor before wrapping me up in his arms. "You're safe. I promise, sweetheart."

"I thought you were going to kill him," I breathe out.

“I was. Didn’t come up with this idea until I was halfway down the stairs.”

My arms tighten around him, my fingers fisting his shirt. “I’m glad you didn’t. You deserve this. But . . .” Tilting my head up, I meet his gaze, butterflies coming to life in my stomach. “Thank you.”

With an almost imperceptible smile, Rhett dips his head down. His lips meet mine in a kiss that’s startlingly sweet considering he just broke a man’s legs.

For you, my mind whispers. *He did it for you.*

“Is everything okay?” Benny shouts from the top of the stairs.

Shit. In my desperation to get to Rhett, I forgot to close the door.

Footsteps pound as Benny runs down the steps, quickly followed by Elliot, Oliver, and then Andrew.

“Wow,” Benny says, his gaze zeroing in on the door that leads to Ludo’s cell. “What’s in there?”

“Nothing,” Rhett replies smoothly, turning to face everyone while keeping an arm around me.

Benny eyes the door. “I thought I heard someone screaming.”

At that, Rhett hesitates. What’re his choices? Gaslight his brother, lie, or tell the truth. None of those are anything near the way Rhett wants to treat Andrew and Benny.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says.

“*More* secrets?” Benny crosses his arms. “You still haven’t told me why you were a prisoner! And I don’t understand because Mr. Holloway and Mr. Axel are *nice.* And then there’s the package, and then—”

“Package?” I ask.

“It’s nothing,” Elliot answers quickly.

“No!” Benny shouts, and I realize that he’s not just annoyed. He’s *lost.* Confused, lonely, worried, and I think even a little scared.

“Ben,” Andrew snaps. “That’s *enough.* Now isn’t the time for a temper tan—”

“No.” Rhett steps forward, his firm tone silencing Andrew immediately. “Benny deserves answers. You both do.”

. . .

Once we’re all upstairs, Rhett has us sit around the kitchen table. Oliver retrieves my soup from my room, and I dip my bread in it and eat slowly. The flavors explode on my tongue, dancing together, and the bread is so soft and delicious.

“Is all of Meredith’s cooking this good?” I whisper to Oliver.

He nods, his eyes glittering. “She’s an amazing cook.”

“All right.” Rhett releases a long, slow breath. “Benny, Andrew, I’m sorry it took me so long to explain everything. I know it’s been a rough couple days.”

Benny still looks upset, but the fact that he’s finally getting answers seems to be placating him enough. As for Andrew, he looks nervous—probably because Rhett could very easily expose that he took part in putting us all through hell.

“For you guys to get the full picture, we need to go back in time a while—to before you were born, Benny.” Rhett pauses, probably bracing himself for all the emotions he’s about to unleash. “Remember when I told you that Richard was married to another woman before yours? Her name was Vivian.”

“That’s your mom, right?” Benny asks.

“Obviously,” Andrew mutters.

With a glare, Benny punches him in the arm. “I heard that!”

“Hey.” Rhett keeps his voice gentle, waiting until his brothers have turned back to looking at him. “I have a lot to tell you, so I need you guys to stay focused.”

“Sorry,” Benny mumbles.

“My parents had me while Richard was in medical school,” Rhett continues. “He had to drop out to take care of me and Mom, and he came to resent me for it. It wasn’t until after Sammy was born and I’d graduated high school that he was able to go back to school. By then, Sammy was already dead.

“She was shot, right?” Benny’s eyes are filled with so much sadness as he asks it.

Rhett nods. “She’d be about Andrew’s age if she was still alive. A couple months older, I think.”

Benny’s features light up with rage. “But that means that she was nine! Who’d kill a nine-year-old girl?”

“A man who only cares about two things,” Rhett replies. “Himself, and power.”

“Who?” Andrew asks, but based on his tone, I think he already knows.

“It was Ludo.”

“Mr. Holloway?” Benny looks from Rhett to Andrew and then back again. “But he was helping us. None of this makes sense! Why was he helping us but keeping you prisoner?”

“He was lying,” Andrew says. “I fell for it. I . . . I’m sorry.”

“We stole something from him,” Rhett says, “but we got caught. He was keeping us prisoner while he punished us.”

Benny’s eyes widen. “Punished you? How?”

Again, Rhett hesitates. Oliver and Elliot share a look of worry. Can we tell Benny the truth? It’s a lot for a child to handle.

Apparently, Andrew doesn’t have the same reservations. “Ludo was going to kill them, and he was using you as leverage to keep them in line. If they tried to escape, Ludo was planning on killing *you.”*

At that, Benny’s face goes slack. “He . . . but . . .”

“We wanted to escape sooner, but we had to wait until we could make sure you’d be safe when we did,” Elliot says. “Ludo is good at manipulating people into believing what he wants them to believe. He’s not a good person—he’s as far from it as someone could possibly get.”

“What about your bodyguards?” Benny asks weakly.

“They were Ludo’s men making sure I didn’t try to run.”

Benny blinks rapidly, but I still see the tears he’s trying to hide. “And Mr. Axel? He was a prisoner, too, right?”

“He . . . he worked for Ludo,” Rhett says, his eyes shining with an unspoken apology. “But he also helped us escape. We wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for him.”

With a quiet sniffle, Benny shakes his head. “You’re lying.”

“He wanted you to know that he’s sorry.” The regret in Rhett’s voice matches his pained expression.

“You’re lying,” Benny yells. He stands so forcefully that he knocks his chair back, and it almost topples to the floor. “He would *never* work for a murderer.”

“Benny—”

“No! I don’t believe you.” He runs out of the kitchen.

“Ben,” Andrew shouts, and I wince at the harsh impatience in his tone. “You get your ass back here right now.”

“Don’t,” Rhett says. When Andrew gets up, Rhett jumps to his feet and grabs him. “Let him go.”

“He’s too old to pull shit like this. He knows better.”

“And *you* should know better than to yell at him the way Richard does.”

Andrew’s head snaps back like he’s been slapped. “What? I’d never—”

“That’s exactly who you just sounded like,” Elliot says, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. “Doubt he’s changed much since the last time we saw him.”

Oliver nods in agreement.

“He’s allowed to be upset,” Rhett says. “Just give him some time to process.”

With a sigh, Andrew flops into his chair. “He’s acting like a five-year-old.”

“No, he’s not. He’s acting like a twelve-year-old who’s been emotionally abused his whole life, recently got kidnapped, had his entire life turned upside down *twice*, and just found out an adult he looked up to is a shitty person.” Elliot’s voice is hard, and just a touch of impatience bleeds through.

I expect Andrew to snap back at Elliot, but he sighs and rubs his face. Again, those conflicting feelings rise up in me. I don’t know what to think of Andrew—to be understanding of him or not. To give him room to grow or to continue being cautious of him.

Maybe it’s both.

“Ludo’s behind that door downstairs, isn’t he?” Andrew asks.

Rhett nods. “I don’t think Benny is ready for that yet.”

“Definitely not,” Andrew mutters. “Are you gonna kill him?”

Narrowing his eyes, Oliver asks, “You gonna keep your mouth shut about it?”

“Who am I gonna tell, the cops? How the fuck would I do that without admitting that I kidnapped my little brother?”

“Fair point.”

“What were you doing in there earlier, Rhett?” Elliot asks.

“Breaking his legs.” He says it so casually, like he’s talking about going on a run or grabbing a drink of water.

Oliver lets out a low whistle. “Good. The bastard deserves it.”

“He really killed Sammy?” Andrew asks. “How did it happen? You said she ran from school?”

Rhett sighs heavily. “Richard was never around, so I had to pick her up from school every day to make sure she got home safe. She slipped away one day, and as far as we can tell, she got lost on the way home.”

“I know I was just a kid, but . . . I’m sorry,” Andrew says quietly.

I think we’re all surprised to hear him say it. Elliot and Oliver exchange a glance while Rhett places a hand on Andrew’s shoulder.

“Thanks. I . . . I’m sorry, too.”

For the rest of the evening, we give Benny some space. We figure that when he’s ready to talk, he’ll come out of wherever he’s hiding—his room, probably. When I was younger, I used to be the same way. I just needed some space to process my feelings.

At some point, I get cold and head upstairs to grab a sweater. My bedroom door is closed, but I can see light shining through underneath it.

How odd.

Pushing it open, I peer inside. And there's Benny, curled up in my reading chair with one of the books he's borrowing.

"I know I shouldn't be in here," he blurts. "But I figured no one would look for me in your room. Please don't be mad."

"Fair enough." I enter my room slowly, keeping my posture lax. It doesn't look like he wants to leave, so at the very least, he doesn't feel the need to hide from me. At the most, maybe he wants someone to talk to.

"I know Rhett wouldn't lie to me," he says, his voice just barely wobbling. "He's a good person. Every time I think he'll yell at me the way Dad does, he's nice to me. He's . . ." Benny frowns, a line appearing between his eyebrows as he tries to think of the right word.

"Patient?" I try.

"Yeah. Patient." Benny fidgets with the book, tracing the spine anxiously. "And he's tried to tell me the truth about everything. Or tell me he will eventually, which he did tonight."

Lowering myself onto the edge of my bed, I give him a sympathetic smile. "He's doing his best. This is all new to him, too."

"I just don't want to believe Mr. Axel would work for a killer." Benny shakes his head. "I liked him."

"For what it's worth, I think Axel was one of Ludo's prisoners, too. Not in the same way as the guys, but . . . well, I don't think Axel likes Ludo, or even wanted to work for him."

"Really?"

I nod.

"That helps some." He flips through the pages, still avoiding my gaze. "Is Rhett mad at me?"

"No. He's worried about you."

“Should I . . . apologize?”

“Do you think you hurt him?”

Benny’s eyes widen. “Did I?”

“I’m not sure.” Resting my elbows on my knees, I lean forward. “My general rule of thumb is that if I’ve treated someone in a way that I wouldn’t like to be treated, then I should apologize to them. Well, unless I don’t like them, or I think they deserve however I treated them.”

“So I don’t have to apologize to Andrew anymore?”

“Ummm, well, that’s—”

Benny snickers, covering his mouth with his hand. “I’m joking.”

I let myself laugh. It’s been a while since I interacted with a kid this much. Sometimes it’s stressful, but overall, I like Benny.

“Will Rhett . . . will he make me . . .” Benny trails off, dropping his gaze.

Oh. Oh my god.

I guess this whole time, there’s been a part of me that hoped Richard treated his other two sons better than he treated Rhett. Considering Benny wanted to run away, it’s completely naive. I just didn’t want to think about it.

“Rhett will never, ever make you beg for his forgiveness,” I say softly. “I promise.”

That seems to help Benny relax. He still looks a little nervous, though. “Will you help me find him?”

“Sure. I think he’s downstairs with the others.”

That makes him hesitate. “Could you . . .”

I smile. “You want me to ask if he can come up here?”

Benny nods.

“Sure. Just give me a couple minutes.”

Downstairs, I find the guys in the living room. Andrew disappeared a while ago, probably to hide out in his room like we thought Benny did. I don't think he knows how to handle being around the guys after what he did to us.

"Hey." I wrap my hand around Rhett's bicep. "Can you come with me for a few minutes?"

"Yeah, of course." He stands from the couch and takes my hand. "What's going on?"

Before I answer, I tug him out of the room. Benny obviously wants privacy, and I don't want to betray his trust. "I found Benny in my room. He wants to talk to you."

A line appears in between Rhett's eyebrows. "Is he okay?"

"I think so."

In my room, Benny is anxiously pacing in front of my bookshelves. He stops when he sees us.

"Do you want me to go?" I ask.

"No, you can stay." Wringing his hands, Benny risks a glance at Rhett. "I'm sorry for yelling. And—and for running away. I didn't want to hurt you."

"Hey, it's okay. You're allowed to be upset." Rhett steps forward, still keeping enough space between them so Benny doesn't feel crowded. "You've been through a lot in the past month."

With a frown, Benny watches Rhett carefully. Based off what I know of Rhett's childhood, this probably isn't the reaction he was expecting. I'm sure there's a part of him that's waiting for Rhett to start yelling or to say cruel things. My guess is up until now, he's never *been* allowed to be upset.

"You mean that?" Benny asks.

“Yeah,” Rhett replies, and I almost miss the nervousness in his voice. This is all new to him, too. “I mean, it’s always best to not treat people poorly because of your feelings, but of course I forgive you.”

At that, Benny’s shoulders drop a couple inches, and relief fills his expression. He closes the distance between them and throws his arms around Rhett’s torso. As he squeezes his eyes shut, he holds onto his older brother tightly.

“Hey, you don’t—you don’t have to hug me if you don’t want to.” Rhett is holding his arms out like he’s afraid to touch Benny.

“I *do* want to.” Benny says, looking up at Rhett. “Thank you.”

“For . . . for forgiving you?”

Benny nods.

The tears in Rhett’s eyes are unmistakable. He swallows while he tries to blink them back. “Benny . . . you don’t—you never have to thank me for that.”

My chest squeezes as I watch them. I wonder if this is something that Benny will look back on in ten or so years. If he’ll realize that Richard isn’t the standard—that there are people who’ll love him no matter what and actually treat him like it.

I’m glad we’re killing their dad, I realize. Unlike Thomas, Richard still has the ability to harm his kids. I don’t want Benny to have to go back to living with a man who makes him think that forgiveness is something he has to thank someone for.

Quietly, I slip out of the room. Benny said I could stay, but I feel like I’m intruding. I have my sweater, and that’s the reason I came up here, anyway.

“You’re sure?” Benny asks right before I close the door softly.

With an aching heart, I tiptoe down the hallway. Yeah, Richard definitely deserves to die, and I can’t wait to watch the life fade from his eyes tomorrow night.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Rhett

“Does this count as a date?”

Despite the circumstances, I smile at Wren’s question. This is the first time the four of us have gone out together since we escaped. It’s far from romantic, but . . . well, we *are* all here.

“I guess,” Elliot says. He’s trying to stay serious, but some amusement still creeps into his tone.

Oliver snorts. “A murder date. Who would’ve ever predicted that?”

“It’s actually kinda fitting,” Wren says. “You know, given your professions.”

Elliot slows the SUV to a stop and glances over at me. “You ready?”

The air here feels thick—almost heavy. Or maybe it’s my coat and the way it’s zipped all the way up and constricting my throat. I nod silently, feeling around for the door handle and opening it. Cool air rushes in, but it does little to help.

“Hey.” He grabs my arm before I can get out. “You’re not alone.”

When I pull free and my feet hit solid ground, Oliver is already waiting for me. I didn't notice him and Wren get out. He places a hand on my shoulder, and I'm just able to fight my gut reaction to shove him away.

Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply. I focus on the warmth of his palm radiating through my clothes and the scent of woodiness and vanilla.

"What if I can't do it?" I whisper.

"Then we will," he replies without hesitation. "For Sammy—*and* for you."

"Masks," Elliot says. "And everyone's got their gloves?"

Oliver pulls his mask over his face. "Ready to go."

Logically, I know I have no reason to be afraid. It's four against one, and three of us are highly skilled in eliminating threats. Since we left home, though, my thoughts have run rampant.

What will he say to me? Richard never let a chance go past to put me down in front of the guys. They know better than to listen—so does Wren—but it doesn't change how humiliating it is.

Wren grabs my hand as we begin our walk. We aren't entering the neighborhood by vehicle so we don't get caught on any security cameras. Thankfully, my father's house is on the border, so we just have to deal with getting over the stone wall around the perimeter of the neighborhood.

It's close to eleven, so darkness shrouds us as we pick our way through the property on the other side of the wall. Once we're directly behind Richard's house, we stop.

How will Benny feel about this?

Will he care? Will he blame himself for this somehow? Or will he just be relieved? I suppose I just have to hope that he'll be happy about it—or that he'll at least come to terms with it when he gets older.

“Do you need a minute?” Elliot asks.

I realize I’ve been staring at the wall for a solid minute. Wren’s hand is still in mine, and I realize I’m holding it rather tightly. With an apologetic smile, I loosen my grip.

We’re in no rush to get back home. Meredith showed up at the house before we left to watch the boys. It’s not like they need a babysitter, but they still don’t know where everything is. If they need something, it’s easier this way. And . . . well, I don’t fully trust Andrew yet. This is different than keeping quiet about Ludo’s death. Richard is his *father.*

“We can take as much time as you need,” Oliver says.

I shake my head. “No. Let’s go.”

The wall isn’t too high, so we don’t have much trouble getting over it. The backyard is large and looks like it’s kept perfectly manicured during the summer months.

A few lights are still on in the house. Most likely, Richard is waiting up for Corinne. We don’t have much time before she leaves to come home, but Finn is tailing her, and as of a couple minutes ago, she’s still at her party. We watch the house for a few minutes before spotting movement in one of the upstairs windows.

Picking one of the back locks doesn’t take long. We enter quietly, and I shut the door slowly so it doesn’t make a single sound. Music drifts through the air, coming from upstairs, and I stop in my tracks.

“What?” Oliver whispers.

“The song.”

My fingers curl into tight fists. On my parents’ anniversary, my mom would put this song on and beg Richard to dance with her to it. It was the

song that played during their first dance at their wedding. She called it *their* song.

So why the hell is Richard listening to it now, all these years later? Does a part of him miss her? How could he after he all but abandoned her?

Without another second of hesitation, I march upstairs and barge into his study. He's sitting in an armchair, happily humming while he flips through a magazine. When he sees me, he jumps to his feet.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"You know exactly who I am."

At my voice, Richard's face falls. He stumbles backward, knocking into his chair and falling on his ass. "What—what are you doing here?"

"Making sure you never hurt anyone ever again."

Realization fills his eyes. "You! Did you steal my boys?"

"No, but I made sure they're safe."

Elliot and Oliver move forward swiftly and haul him to his feet.

"Let go of me!" Richard tries to yank his arms free. "How are you both still with him? Haven't you realized—"

"Watch your mouth," Oliver snaps. "Unless you want this to be more painful than it needs to be."

Wren hovers close to me, and as the guys drag Richard out of his office and toward the bathroom, I realize she's placing herself in between him and me. My heart squeezes. Even as my mind fills in Richard's cut-off sentence with all the things I know he wants to say, the pain eases.

She'll protect me until the bitter end—they all will.

Richard is shouting as Elliot and Oliver shove him into the bathroom. They can't be too forceful—we don't want any signs of struggle. But they're strong enough that they can contain him easily.

Before I follow, my eyes land on his phone, the screen still lit up. He has a messaging app pulled up, and in it is a text, drafted but not sent, meant for Corinne.

Richard: Listening to our song and thinking of you.

I delete the message, anger washing over me and renewing all the hurt I did my best to keep in a box. With a forceful breath, I type out a new message—a simple apology—and set his phone on his desk.

"Rhett," Ell calls.

"Coming," I yell back, rounding the desk and opening the top drawer. As I suspected, the knife he's had since I was a kid is nestled in between pens and sticky notes. I grab it, the weight familiar in my palm, before sliding the drawer closed.

Wren and I move toward the bathroom, and I almost warn her about how much blood there will be, but then I stop myself. She knows. By this point, she's watched a handful of men die—two of them at her own hand. This isn't something that'll catch her off guard anymore.

We pass through Richard and Corinne's bedroom and into their bathroom. The clawfoot tub stands away from the wall, which gives us easy access from all sides. Oliver and Elliot are holding Richard down while he does his best to get free.

"Your song?" I growl, stalking up to the edge of the tub. *"Your song?"*

At the fury in my voice, Richard freezes. "I—"

"Did you ever love her?" I demand, my voice breaking.

She deserved better. So much better.

Richard tries to shove Elliot and Oliver away, but they keep him firmly pinned down in the tub. One day, hopefully soon, I'll look back on this and

take pleasure in the memory of the panic in his eyes. But right now, all I feel is the pain and rage I've bottled up my entire life.

"Answer me," I grit out.

"At one point, I thought I did," my father replies, his gaze dropping. "But now, I'm not sure. We were young. Stupid. We didn't know what love was."

"She knew," I tell him.

Everything I planned to say to him feels so unimportant now. Would it really even matter? This—this is *beyond* heartless. There's no point in explaining all the reasons I'm doing this. He'll never understand. He'll never care.

Flipping open the knife, I grab one of Richard's hands and force his fingers to wrap around the handle. "Do it."

"What? No! Are you fucking kidding me? I'm not *killing myself,* I—"

"Do it," I shout. "You're a doctor. You know how to make it as quick and painless as possible. If you make me kill you, I won't provide you with that courtesy."

He gasps, horror and disgust falling over his features. "You—"

But Oliver clamps a hand over his mouth. His gaze locks with mine, hardened with anger on my behalf. "He doesn't get to say anything else to you. Not on my watch."

The next couple minutes in the bathroom are a blur. I'll never forget Richard's whimpers of pain or all the blood, but it's not the thing that sticks with me the most. What does is the relief. The weight that lifts off my chest, so familiar I feel unsteady without it.

"It's done," Elliot says quietly, only letting go of Richard once his chest has stopped moving. "He's gone."

When I stand, I feel dizzy. I've dreamed of this day for years, and now it's finally here. My father is dead. He's finally paid for his part in Sammy's death—for his part in my misery.

Wren grabs onto me, and I realize I'm swaying. I don't think my body knows how to react. Standing over my father's dead body, knowing my sister's murderer is locked up and in an unimaginable amount of pain, I've never felt safer.

"Hey." Oliver places a gloved hand to my chest. "You're okay."

My smile is shaky and mostly hidden by my mask.

"You're okay," he repeats as Elliot slides an arm around me to take some of my weight.

For a few brief seconds, I lean into them, closing my eyes. I *am* okay—possibly for the first time since I was young.

"Thank you," I whisper, feeling like I could float away—like they're the only thing tethering me to the earth. "I love you all so much."

And then we go, slipping into the darkness and driving back home. None of us speak. None of us need to.

When we finally fall into bed, I doze off quickly, and I sleep for the longest I have in years.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Wren

In the morning, I wake up next to Elliot. When I roll away from him to stretch out, he grabs my waist and pulls me back.

I let out a laugh. “Elliot!”

“No,” he mumbles, nuzzling my neck. “Stay with me.”

“I was just getting more comfortable.” Moving onto my side so I’m facing him, I caress his cheek with the backs of my fingers. “I’m not going anywhere.”

With a content sigh, he closes his eyes and relaxes. He keeps an arm draped over my side while he drifts off again. After a couple minutes, I roll over and grab my phone from my nightstand.

Over the past couple days, I’ve been texting with Ava more and more. I’ve been trying to figure out how to explain things to her, but it’s difficult over messages. I was waiting until things calmed down here to get together with her, and I think we’re at a good point now.

Wren: Are you free at all this week?

I don’t expect an immediate reply since she’s probably at work, as long as her schedule is the same as it was when I left.

Eventually, I hear a door open and softly shut in the hallway. Oliver slept in Rhett’s room last night. Based on the time, I’m sure he’s still asleep, but I’m not surprised that Rhett is awake.

“Hey,” I whisper, nudging Elliot gently.

He groans. “Time to get up?”

“Mmhmm.”

We both use the bathroom and brush our teeth. While we get dressed, I watch Elliot pull a shirt over his head. The morning sunlight makes him look mouth-wateringly good.

When he catches me staring, Elliot smirks. Heat rushes through my body as I quickly avert my eyes, remembering the way he tied me up and fucked me with Oliver the other day.

“You don’t have to look away,” he tells me, sauntering over to me and pinning me against my dresser. “I like it when you watch me.”

“It doesn’t make you uncomfortable?”

He shakes his head, his lips just barely touching mine. “Never. Watch me however often you want, love.”

I fit my mouth to his, reveling in the softness of his lips. He leans down and cradles my face in his hands. It always makes me feel so cherished when he does that.

“How’s your head?” he asks when we reluctantly pull away.

“Doesn’t hurt unless I touch it.”

At that, he smiles and slides my hand into his. “Good. That’s improvement.”

Downstairs, Rhett is in the kitchen. An array of ingredients litter the counter. He doesn't notice us at first because he's running the mixer, but when he shuts it off and turns, he smiles at us.

"Morning. Coffee?"

"I've got it." Rounding the island, Elliot slips his arms around Rhett and kisses his neck. "What're you making?"

"Cinnamon rolls. Figured we should celebrate somehow."

Elliot frowns. "If we're celebrating, we've gotta do more than just cinnamon rolls." But then he leans over, taking a look in the mixer and licking his lips. "Although this is a good start."

Chuckling, Rhett smacks Elliot's ass as he moves toward the coffee pot. "You two sleep okay?"

"Yeah," Elliot says. "You?"

"Really well, actually. I feel good."

And he looks it, too. Rhett's steps are lighter, and he seems more well-rested than I've ever seen him. It makes me happy to see him like this.

We pitch in to help Rhett finish up the cinnamon rolls. While they're in the oven, we make more coffee. Oliver will probably be awake soon, and Elliot wants more, too.

"I was downstairs earlier, and I noticed what you left in Ludo's cell," Rhett says to Elliot, leaning against the counter. His hands are resting on top of it, but the relaxed position doesn't cover up the unspoken questions in his eyes. "What made you decide to go with a cattle prod?"

Elliot takes a long, slow sip of his coffee. "I'm not sure it's my place to say."

"Oliver doesn't want to talk about it. Asked me to ask you."

Grimacing, Elliot sets his mug on the counter. “Sounds like you’ve pieced it together.”

“What happened?” I ask.

Elliot hangs his head. “I snuck into O’s room a couple times. Climbed out of my window and inched across a ledge. The first time, I held him while he fell asleep. The second time . . . I fell asleep, too.”

“And they found you,” Rhett says.

Nodding, Elliot rubs at his face. “I should’ve been the one Ludo punished. It should’ve been me. But his men dragged us downstairs, and he forced me to watch while he hurt Oliver.” Elliot shakes his head. “I begged to take his place, but Ludo ignored me.”

I thought I noticed something off between Elliot and Oliver, but I wasn’t sure. Elliot has seemed avoidant, almost guilty, while Oliver has just seemed sad. Now I know why, I guess.

“He doesn’t blame you,” I say, resting my hand on Elliot’s arm. I haven’t talked to Oliver about it, but I know there’s no way he would. “You know that, right?”

With his eyes closed, Elliot nods. “But that doesn’t change that it’s my fault.”

At that, Rhett’s hands curl into fists. “No. There’s been enough of that, Ell. We all know who’s at fault here, and it’s not any of us.”

“But—”

“All of this lies squarely on Holloway’s shoulders,” Rhett says firmly. “*He’s* the one who killed Sammy. *He’s* the one who locked us up. *He’s* the one who tortured O. No one else is to blame but him.”

“I just—”

“*No.* This isn’t your fault, Ell.”

“Fine,” he sighs. “What made you break Holloway’s legs?”

It’s a blatant attempt to change the subject, but it works.

“I had a nightmare about Ludo escaping and killing us,” I say.

“I didn’t even want there to be a question in her mind,” Rhett adds.

“I know there wasn’t,” I tell Elliot quickly. “There’s no way he could’ve gotten out, even before. But I just . . .”

Elliot leans over and brushes his lips across my cheek. “You don’t have to explain, love. You feel safer?”

I nod.

“That’s what’s important.”

The oven beeps, and Rhett pulls out the cinnamon rolls.

“Ohhh, those smell amazing!” Oliver says as he walks into the kitchen. He grins at me, planting a happy kiss on my lips before doing the same to Ell. “How’re you feeling, Rhett?”

“A lot better.” Rhett grabs onto Oliver and kisses him deeply, not letting him pull away until he’s had his fill.

“I’m glad.” Oliver reaches for one of the cinnamon rolls.

Rhett slaps his hand away. “You’re going to burn yourself. Get some coffee and sit down.”

With a playful roll of his eyes, Oliver does so. “What are our plans today?”

“Not much, as far as I’m concerned. We have to play the waiting game to get the boys back home until after the funeral, so . . .” Elliot shrugs. “Check on Ludo, I guess. But that’s it.”

“I figure I’ll head down there sometime before lunch.” Rhett is holding the icing bowl, but he sets it down, and his eyes travel over us until they land on Oliver. “I think you should come with me.”

“No.”

“Oliver—”

“I don’t want to see him,” Oliver says flatly.

“I think it would help you.” Rhett hasn’t looked away from him, and his voice is quiet but determined.

“*Help?* Are you fucking kidding me? Just looking at him would . . .” Shuddering, Oliver turns away.

“He’s not the same,” Rhett says. “He’s broken, O. He can’t even move without crying.”

That gets Oliver to pause, but he still doesn’t look at Rhett.

“I don’t want the most potent memory you have of him to be what he did to you,” Rhett continues. “Replace it with something else.”

Oliver bites his lip while we sit in silence for a second. I’m beginning to wonder if he’ll ever reply when he says, “I’ll think on it, but I’m not making any promises. Anyone else have other plans for today?” He looks to me.

“Ava and I are trying to get together. I’m not sure when—probably later this week. If it’s too soon, I can try to push it back, but she’s pretty worried.”

Elliot shakes his head. “It’s not too soon. But . . . what are you going to tell her?”

“I’m not sure. She deserves as much of an explanation as I can give her, but obviously she can’t know all of it.”

“Do you trust her?” Oliver asks.

“I do. But I can’t tell her you’re hitmen, or that we’ve killed anyone, so . . . I’m kinda at a loss.”

Elliot runs his thumb along his bottom lip as he thinks. “To be honest, it looks like your best bet is to tell her that there’s a lot you simply can’t talk about. It’s for her own protection. Letting her in on what you’ve actually been doing would be incriminating her.”

“You think that’d work?”

“That’s what we told you when we first got together,” Oliver points out. “You went along with it.”

“I did, didn’t I?” I let out a small laugh. “That was a little naive.”

Oliver shrugs. “Or you knew deep down it was the right choice.”

I smile. “Maybe so.”

Rhett serves up the cinnamon rolls, now doused in icing. We all dig in. Just as I’m wondering when the boys will be up, my phone vibrates.

Ava: I’m pretty busy this week, but I’m free this afternoon if that works for you?

Wren: That sounds perfect!

“I’ll go with you,” Oliver volunteers after we pick out where we’re going to meet. “Getting out for a bit sounds nice.”

I smile. It’s their policy—they rarely ever leave home alone. Besides, I don’t really want to be without them. Maybe it’s silly, but I just got them back. I’m not ready to leave them, even if it’s just to visit Ava.

Currently, I think we’re trying to avoid going out much. It’s not fair to Andrew and Benny since they can’t be seen in public. This is an exception, and there probably won’t be many more until they’re back to living with Corinne.

Eventually, the boys come out, and we make a real breakfast while they eat their cinnamon rolls. We keep the conversation light, although I don’t pay close attention. My mind is already on later.

It’s been forever since I’ve last seen Ava. It’s not like I’ve been intentionally avoiding her. We’ve just been so caught up in getting revenge and then saving the guys that literally everything else has fallen to the back burner.

She’ll understand, right?

Guilt winds its way through me. Throughout all of this, Ava has done her best to be there for me. She has no clue what’s going on or why I’ve dropped out of her life, but she’s consistently checked in on me. She even told my mom off for me, for fuck’s sake.

As the guys laugh around me, I make up my mind to change that. I’ve missed Ava, and she deserves better from me. Sure, I’ve been trying to make sure none of us died, but we’re safe now.

As long as Ava can accept my non-explanation, I want to do my best to prioritize our friendship. Now that I’m not working at the coffee shop anymore, we can’t just catch up and talk at work. I’d like to do the same with Aubrey, although it’ll look different, I’m sure.

A warm hand presses against my back, and I smile at the light scent of sandalwood and oranges. Elliot nuzzles my neck gently.

“You okay, love?”

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

“About?”

I turn around so I’m facing him and slip my arms around his neck. “The future.”

Our future.

The one I wasn’t sure we’d get to have—and that I’ll always be eternally grateful for.

. . .

“Wren! Over here!” Ava waves from where she’s sitting at a picnic table shrouded by trees.

We decided to meet at a small park so we could get outside and enjoy the fresh air. The sun is out today, and it’s getting warm enough that we can sit outside without freezing our asses off.

Kissing my cheek, Oliver slips his hand from mine. “I’ll wait over there.” He nods to a bench that’s out of earshot of the picnic table. “Take however much time you need, princess.”

“Thanks.”

As I approach, Ava jumps up from her seat, and we throw our arms around each other immediately. It feels good to see her again.

“How’ve you been?” I ask. “How’re things going with Liz?”

Ava grins. “Amazingly. We’ve talked every single day since the ball. She got sick last week, so I made her soup and brought her some meds and tissues and stuff like that. Aaaaand then I got sick because she looked miserable, so I hung around to try to cheer her up. But I’m all better now.”

I laugh. That’s *classic* for Ava.

“But tell me about you,” she says. “What’s been going on? Are the guys somehow connected to your kidnapping? Is there more going on here than you told the police?”

“Yes, but . . . not in the way you think.”

“Are you in danger?” she asks, worry creeping into her voice.

“No,” I say quickly. “Not anymore.”

Her eyes go wide. “Anymore? Girl, what the hell is going on?”

I fidget with the sleeve of my jacket. “A lot. I . . . I want to start off by saying I’m sorry. I basically dropped off the face of the earth after the ball, and then even more so after I quit. It wasn’t fair to you—you deserved more of an explanation, and I’m sorry.”

A soft smile appears on Ava’s features, and she reaches across the table and takes my hands. “I know you, Wren. You wouldn’t do this on purpose. You’re, like, the *opposite* of a bitch. Well, usually.”

That makes me laugh, and I squeeze her hands in return. “Emphasis on the *usually.”*

Her expression grows serious. “So what happened?”

“Well, first off, when I got kidnapped, I actually didn’t.”

“Wait, what?”

“But I *did* get kidnapped a week or so later.”

“What?!”

“The first time around, I disappeared, but I was with the guys, and I was perfectly safe. Adam attacked me after I had dinner with him and our parents, and then Thomas was there too—”

“That motherfucker,” Ava grumbles, and I’m not sure if she’s talking about one of them or both of them.

“But then Oliver saved me, but he was wearing a mask, so to Adam and Thomas, it kinda . . . *looked* like I got kidnapped. They got the police involved, and when I turned up again, it was easier to let them go with the story they already had.”

Ava narrows her eyes. “Why not just tell them the truth?”

“Because of other things that are . . . sort of connected. Things that the police can never know—things I can’t tell you, either.”

“Why not?”

“It could . . . lead to trouble. For you and for us.”

“Are the guys spies or something?” she asks suspiciously. “Part of a secret government operation?”

“No, not really, but . . . maybe spy-adjacent?”

She frowns. “Spy-adjacent?”

“I really can’t tell you, Ava. I wish I could, but it could backfire and end up hurting you.”

“Jesus. You’re serious, aren’t you?”

I nod, relieved she seems to be taking this okay so far.

“So where were you, then?” Ava asks. “Can you at least tell me that?”

I giggle. “Getting railed by my three boyfriends in a cabin in the woods.”

At first, her jaw drops, but then she rolls her eyes. “Oh my god, of *course* you were. Considering how this all started, it should’ve been my first guess. They’re obsessed with you, aren’t they?”

A familiar warmth spreads through my body. “At this point, I think it’s safe to say that we’re all obsessed with each other.”

“And they’re good for you?” she asks cautiously.

“They are. The past couple months have been stressful, don’t get me wrong. But the guys have been there for me through it all. They’re more supportive than anyone I’ve ever been with.”

Ava’s expression goes soft. “Tell me about your actual kidnapping.”

“The guys had to leave for a business trip of sorts, and while they were gone, one of their . . . rivals kidnapped me. I almost died a couple times.”

“Oh my god,” she murmurs.

“It was terrifying, but they found me and got me out of there.”

“Wren, I’m so sorry. I can’t even imagine what that would be like.”

My throat aches, and as my eyes begin to sting, I glance away. Oliver is scrolling on his phone, but the second he feels my gaze on him, he looks up. At my expression, his face falls, and he sits up straighter.

He's always so attentive—all of them are. It eases the pain in my heart, and so does Ava rubbing her thumb over the back of my hand.

Giving Oliver a reassuring smile, I blink back my tears and return my attention to Ava. "After they rescued me, things were hectic for a while, and . . . well, then *they* got kidnapped."

A line forms in between Ava's eyebrows. "It sounds like their jobs are really dangerous."

"They were."

"Were?"

I nod. "Obviously, we were able to rescue the guys." I gesture to Oliver. "And I think things are going to be different from here on out. They got into their profession for a personal reason, and that's been dealt with, so I think they're done."

"You guys haven't talked about it?"

"We have, a bit. There's been a *lot* to go over, and we're still wrapping up some things. Conversations about the future will come when we're ready."

"Fair enough." Ava pauses, watching me carefully for a second. "So you think this is it? You think they're it?"

"I *know* they're it," I whisper, and this time, the tears in my eyes aren't from pain or sadness. "I love them all so much, Ava."

"Then I'm happy for you." She smiles, and while her tone is teasing, I know she means what she's saying. "But if you get kidnapped again, I'm killing them."

“It won’t happen again, trust me. There’s a reason I’m not here alone. They’ve been protective from day one, and I don’t think that’s going to change—ever.”

“That’s sweet,” Ava says, pressing a hand over her heart. “I’m glad you found them, Wren.”

We keep chatting, only stopping when Ava’s stomach growls and we realize we’ve been sitting here for hours. After one last hug, we go our separate ways, promising to get together soon. I feel better now that I’ve explained things to her as much as I can.

On the way home, I hold one of Oliver’s hands while he uses the other to steer. Piece by piece, everything seems to be falling into place. The guys’ revenge plans are coming to fruition, I’ve dealt with Patricia and Thomas, and now Richard is dead. Once we get the boys back to Corinne, there’s only one big thing left to do.

I sneak a glance at Oliver when he makes a turn. However much I agree with Rhett, I don’t want to force him to see Ludo one last time if he doesn’t want to. But at the same time, I think it’ll help. When Elliot told me what Holloway did to Oliver, it broke my heart. I can’t even imagine what he went through, so I know I wouldn’t want to relive it.

No matter what, though, we’ll be there for him. I won’t judge him if he decides not to see Ludo again. I’ll never know what he went through, and I’ll never fully understand his thoughts and feelings.

All I can do is support him as he tries to move on. It’s what he’s done for me, and it’s what all three guys will *continue* doing for me.

“You’re worried about me,” Oliver says, and I realize I’m staring at him.

“Maybe a little,” I admit.

“Ell told you what happened?”

“Yeah.”

“So you . . . understand why I don’t want to go down there?”

“I do,” I say softly, only hesitating for a split second.

“But you agree with Rhett.”

“I’m not sure. The best comparison I have is my fear of water. But . . . well, it’s different. I can’t avoid water forever. After a bit, though, you’ll never have to worry about seeing Ludo again.”

“Except in my head,” he mutters.

I nod. The same is true for me. Thomas, Tyler, Jordan—hell, even Adam. They all flit through my head daily, leaving me unsettled. Finding a distraction has been easy these days, and I’m sure the memories will fade eventually. For now, though, they’re potent enough that they keep me up at night sometimes.

“I’m still thinking about what he said,” Oliver tells me. “I just . . . I want to be sure.”

“I understand that. I think waiting until you know is smart.”

Blowing out a breath, he says, “I feel like it could be a good idea for me to see him all broken and beat up. But at the same time, what happens if I go down there and freak out? How pathetic would that be, to be terrified of a man who’s in so much pain that he can’t even move?”

“It wouldn’t be pathetic,” I tell him gently.

He sighs. “I know that. I guess I just don’t *feel* it. And the last thing I want to do is give him the satisfaction of seeing me scared of him.”

“*Are* you scared of him?”

“I don’t think so. But . . . I don’t know. I don’t think I will until I see him. And by then, it’d be too late.”

“I won’t judge you if you don’t go down,” I say.

“I know, princess. I just don’t want to regret my decision.” He pauses before adding, “Either way.”

Humming in agreement, I rub the back of his hand with my thumb. I’m not in a position to tell him what to do—none of us are. He’ll make up his mind when he’s ready. The only thing I can do is make sure I’m there during the aftermath.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Oliver

When we get home, the house is empty. Elliot texted the group chat to let me and Wren know that they took the boys on a hike. Not that many people venture into the woods behind the mansion, and it's something to keep Benny occupied.

The alone time with Wren is nice. I'm restless after sitting on the bench for so long, so she hangs out with me while I work out. When I'm finished, we both head up to my room, and I get in the shower. She doesn't come with me, but I like knowing she's close by.

In the shower, I close my eyes as the hot water falls onto my skin. When I was locked up in Ludo's mansion, the shower I had access to only had cold water. Plus, I couldn't relax in there. I never knew when someone was going to come in and drag me downstairs into Ludo's torture chamber.

I shudder, leaning forward and placing my hands on the shower wall. Elliot's face flashes in my mind, his cheeks covered with tears. The memory morphs into Ludo's grin as he . . .

"Stop," I whisper.

I just want to forget.

Maybe Rhett is right. If I can see Ludo helpless and broken—if I can give myself a memory of *me* torturing *him* instead of the other way around, then maybe these thoughts will fade. I don't think my psychologist would agree, but it's worth a shot.

I hope, anyway.

Shutting off the water, I step out and wrap myself in my towel. The soft material against my skin helps bring me back to the present, and I take a few measured, controlled breaths to calm my mind.

"You're okay," I whisper.

When I step into my bedroom, Wren is curled up on my bed with a book in her hands. Her eyes immediately snap to mine before slowly taking in my bare chest and the towel knotted at my hips.

"What're you reading?" I ask.

"I . . . wasn't." Bashfully, she sets the book on my nightstand. "Couldn't focus."

Stepping closer, I watch her as she continues taking me in. "What were you thinking about?"

"You. About . . . joining you."

"Why didn't you?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Didn't want to deal with getting wet."

With a chuckle, I say, "I definitely understand that."

Again, her eyes travel lower, and she licks her lips.

"What're you thinking about now?"

"You," she whispers. "Just you."

At some point, she got changed. It looks like she took her bra off because I can see her nipples peeking through her T-shirt.

“And what do you want, princess?”

She gives me a playful look. “I think that’s pretty obvious.”

“Then touch yourself,” I tell her, taking a single step forward. My voice is thick with desire as I undo my towel and let it drop to the floor. “Show me just how much you missed me.”

Slowly, she lifts her shirt above her head. I stifle a groan at the sight of her, watching as she sheds the rest of her clothes.

So goddamn pretty.

Leaning back against the pillows, Wren spreads her legs. She squeezes her breasts while keeping her eyes locked on me. “Like this?” she asks, pinching her nipples gently.

“However you want. Just let me look at you.”

She smiles as she dips one of her hands in between her legs. While she does, I wrap my fingers around my hardening cock and stroke lightly. Her eyes flare with heat, and she pinches her nipples with her free hand.

Using her middle finger, Wren circles her clit. Part of me wants to drag her to the edge of the bed so I can eat her out, but I like watching her like this. I could stare at her for hours and never get bored.

“Look how wet you are,” I say, stepping closer. “You got yourself all worked up while I was in the shower, didn’t you?”

She nods breathlessly. Now, her gaze is locked on my hand as I stroke my cock. She licks her lips again, her eyes filling with hunger.

As Wren’s finger begins moving faster, I crawl onto the bed. I run my hand up and down my dick as I watch her.

“Oliver,” she moans as I kneel in between her legs.

“I know, princess.” I smile down at her, my body heating from being so close to her—from the way she’s looking at me. I love watching the

desperation build in her expression, but god, I want to be inside her.

“Give me more,” I tell her. “Go harder. Make yourself come.”

But she shakes her head, slowing her finger before pulling her hand away entirely. She holds her arms out to me. “I want to come because of you. Please?”

Goddamn.

“Oh, you don’t have to beg, princess. I’ll do it with pleasure.”

Wren sits up and grabs a pair of leather handcuffs from the nightstand drawer. Before she can get them around my wrists, I grab her and push her down onto her back.

“Not today, princess. This time, I’m in charge.”

As I shove her legs apart, Wren gasps. I drag a finger through her arousal and bring it to my mouth. Her lips part as I suck it clean, my eyes closing and a moan escaping my throat as I do so.

“Oliver,” she whispers.

“Give me your hands.”

She does, shivering with delight as I secure the cuffs around her wrists. I grab a pillow and place it under her hips before rubbing the head of my cock over her clit. With a whimper, she spreads her legs wider.

Sliding my dick lower, I push inside her. My thumb immediately comes to her clit, and her breath catches.

“God,” I choke out as she tightens around me.

“More,” she moans.

I smile. “Such a greedy slut, aren’t you?”

“*More,* Oliver.”

Pressing into her another inch, I rub small circles over her clit. She reaches for me, grabbing onto one of my arms with both her hands.

“Uh uh,” I tell her. “Touch yourself. Make yourself come on my cock.”

With a whimper, Wren rubs her clit while I fuck her hard and deep. Her moans get louder until she falls apart on a silent scream. I can feel her clenching around my dick while she works herself through her orgasm.

“Such a good girl. Now do it again.”

She groans weakly. “Oliver—”

“I’m not stopping until you come again, princess. Now play with your clit like the good little slut I know you can be.”

Sliding her hands in between us again, she does as I say. I keep my pace even, watching her breasts bounce with every thrust.

“So beautiful,” I murmur. I can feel the pressure building up in my body, so I don’t slow down.

Wren arches her back as her eyes roll into the back of her head. I want to kiss her neck, to suck on it and leave a mark, but if I bend down any farther, she won’t be able to move her fingers. I settle with watching her as she loses herself in the sensations.

“Is this what you wanted all along?” I ask her, my voice tight. “You wanted me to take control of you, pin you to the bed, and fuck you senseless?”

“Yes,” she gasps. “Oliver—Oliver, I’m gonna squirt.”

“Let it happen, princess.” I keep pounding into her, waiting until she slaps her hands over her mouth to muffle her cry. I pull out, and she squirts everywhere, screaming into her hands. “Oh, that’s it,” I praise as I rub her clit to push her even higher. “Such a good girl, Wren. Such a good girl.”

“Oliver!” She squirms, panting and whimpering when I don’t move my hand away. “O, I can’t. It’s too—it’s too much!”

I let up, but almost immediately, I slide back into her. “We’re not done yet.” I grab her hands and pin them above her head.

Wren locks her legs around me, pushing me deeper into her. Her moans are sending me closer to the edge, especially when paired with the greedy, satisfied look in her eyes.

“I want you to come inside me,” she whispers. “Come for me, O.”

“Wren,” I groan. I slam my lips to hers and pump into her a few more times before my orgasm finally crashes into me.

Wren whimpers as she feels it, and her legs tighten around my waist. My mind goes completely blank, the feeling of her wrapped around me being the only thing I can process. My body sags against hers as all the tensions floods out of me.

“I love you,” she says softly, peppering my neck and shoulder with kisses.

“Goddamn, princess.” I push myself up onto my elbows just enough that I can kiss her. “I love you, too.”

. . .

When Wren and I make it downstairs, everyone is back from their hike. Benny and Andrew are playing video games in the living room while Rhett and Elliot are talking quietly in the library. They both stop when we come in.

“Hey,” Elliot says, smiling and drawing me into a long hug. “We were wondering if you two went to bed.”

“Sort of did,” Wren replies with a playful look.

Elliot laughs. “That should’ve been my first guess.”

“How did your talk go with Ava?” Rhett asks Wren.

“Good,” she says. “We’re planning on getting together sometime in the next month. She seems to understand that I can’t tell her all the details.”

“I’m glad it went well.” Rhett kisses her on the cheek before turning to me. He purposefully keeps the question out of his expression, but I know he wants to ask.

All day, I’ve been thinking it over. Sitting on the bench waiting for Wren gave me plenty of time, but I didn’t feel closer to an answer until I talked things over with her. I realized I was trying to avoid regret instead of finding closure. All three of them would tell me it’s reasonable. It *is* reasonable. But it’s not where my focus should be.

“I’m ready,” I say.

Rhett furrows his brows, and Elliot’s smile morphs into a concerned frown.

“Ready?” Rhett asks.

“To see him.”

He shakes his head. “I wasn’t expecting an answer today. You can take more time.”

“I don’t need more time. I want to see what you’ve reduced him to.”

There’s a possibility it’ll backfire, but I’m willing to risk my chances. Even if I panic, I’ll at least have the memory of him sitting in that cell, a mere shadow of his former self.

“All right,” Elliot says as he glances in the direction of the living room. “The boys are occupied enough. You want to go right now?”

“Yes.” My hand slides into Wren’s. “With all three of you, preferably.”

“Of course,” she says.

We quietly head downstairs, and I keep Wren’s hand firmly in mine. I truly think this will help, but I’ve been known to make reckless mistakes

before.

When Rhett opens the door to Ludo's cell, I brace myself for the worst. One look at him, and I'm afraid I'll dissolve into tears. But that doesn't happen.

Holloway's face is cut and bruised, and he's curled up in the corner of his cell as much as he can be. Both his legs are swollen and stretched out at awkward angles. At some point, Rhett or Ell released him from his restraints, but it doesn't matter. He's not going anywhere.

It smells in here, which only adds to the picture. Ludo isn't just helpless—he's mangled beyond recognition. It's hard to believe he's alive except for his ragged breathing and the frantic look in his eyes.

I knew Rhett broke his legs, along with the other things he and Ell have done to him, but . . . *damn.*

I don't have to look at the way Holloway's face is scrunched up to know he's in a lot of pain. He's shaking, and the blood and bruises all over his body are evidence enough.

Ludo doesn't speak. I wonder if it hurts him to do so, considering he probably has multiple broken ribs. When Elliot crouches down next to him with a bottle of water, he flinches.

"Drink," Elliot tells him.

But Ludo doesn't take the bottle. When Elliot opens the cap and holds it to his lips, Holloway doesn't open his mouth. Elliot applies pressure to Ludo's leg, which makes him wail in agony. It's a good thing we closed the door because the boys *definitely* would've heard.

"Drink." Elliot tips the bottle and pours the water into Ludo's mouth.

I don't think anyone's fed him, and we don't want him to die of dehydration. Elliot gives him around half the bottle before standing.

“What do you want to do?” Rhett asks.

“Nothing,” I say.

Rhett, Ell, and Wren watch me as I stare down at Ludo. He used to hold his head so high, his posture set with confidence and his expression smug. Now, his eyes are blank. The only thing in them is a hopeless longing for the release of death.

“You’re sure?” Rhett asks.

I raise my eyes to meet Rhett’s gaze. “Did you hurt him for me?”

“Of course I did.” He sounds almost insulted that I feel the need to ask.

Next, I turn to Elliot. “Did you?”

He nods wordlessly. “I have, and I’m not done yet.”

“Then that’s enough for me.” I close the distance between me and Elliot and take his hands in mine. My voice softens as I stare into his eyes, wishing I could take away his guilt. “Let it be enough.”

It’s not your fault, I want to tell him. But he’ll never believe that. The best he can do is try to make up for it, and the best I can do in return is let him know that I see what he’s doing.

“I don’t need to hurt him,” I say. “Not when you’re doing it for me.”

It wasn’t my original plan. On my way down here, I had every intention of putting Ludo through hell. But then I saw him, and I realized I didn’t need to. I have Rhett and Ell here. They’re both already making sure he pays for what he did to me.

“He doesn’t deserve any more of my time,” I say, moving toward the cell door. I feel oddly light—a far stretch from the panic I thought would be coursing through me. “And I deserve better than to waste my energy on him.”

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Elliot

Richard’s obituary is printed in the newspaper a few days after we killed him. I can tell that lying to Benny about the circumstances of his death is weighing on Rhett, but it’s our best option. Kids can be unreliable. Eventually, we’ll tell him the truth.

“Hey,” Rhett says, walking into the game room. “Who’s winning?”

“Andrew is,” Benny grouses, frowning at the pool table. But then his composure brightens. “Wanna be on my team? We could beat him together!”

“Hey! That’s not fair.” Andrew lightly shoves Benny, although his expression is more amused than irritated. “You won the last two rounds.”

“That’s true.” Benny grins. “I’m gonna become a professional pool player.”

I chuckle as Wren and Oliver file in behind me. Having all of us in here might be a mistake, but we want Benny and Andrew to know that they have *all* of our support, not just Rhett’s.

“Do you mind pausing the game for a little bit?” Rhett asks. “I’ve got some news you both need to hear.”

I was expecting Benny to protest, but curiosity sparks in his eyes. Leaning his cue against the wall, he turns to us.

“Is something wrong?” Andrew asks.

“Sort of,” Rhett says slowly. He hesitates, running a hand over his hair. “Richard . . . passed away.”

Silence fills the room as Benny stares at us. Andrew is watching him closely, as unsure of how he’ll react as we are.

“He’s dead?” Benny asks.

Rhett nods. “We saw his obituary in the paper.”

At that, Andrew purses his lips, but he doesn’t say anything. He may know we’re lying, but he knows to keep his mouth shut until his brother is older.

Benny’s eyebrows are furrowed, and he’s staring at the ground. When he doesn’t say anything for a while, Rhett steps up to him.

“I know this is probably hard. It’s a lot to take in.”

But Benny shakes his head, his frown deepening. “I don’t . . . I don’t understand.”

“What do you mean?” Rhett asks.

Rubbing at his chest, Benny glances from Rhett to Andrew. “I should feel sad. Shouldn’t . . . shouldn’t I feel sad?” Tears fill his eyes and fall onto his cheeks.

Andrew gives him a bewildered look. “You *sure* you’re not sad?”

“I feel *bad,*” Benny yells, scrunching his face up and rubbing at his eyes. “He’s dead, and I’m *happy.* That’s not what’s supposed to happen, is it?”

Shrugging, Andrew shoves his hands into his pockets. “I’m glad the bastard is dead.”

“Hey.” Hesitantly, Rhett places a hand on Benny’s shoulder. “You don’t have to be upset that he’s gone.”

“But—but doesn’t that make me a bad person?” Benny sobs. His head hits Rhett’s chest as he leans into him. “He *died.”*

“No,” Rhett says soothingly. “It doesn’t make you a bad person at all.”

“I’m glad he’s dead, too,” I add, hoping I’m not about to make everything worse. Giving Benny a small smile, I move closer to him. “He hurt a lot of people, including the three of you.”

With a sniffle, Benny looks up at me. “But . . .”

“But what?” Andrew asks.

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t feel right.” He rubs at his eyes. “What about Mom?”

“Do you want to see her?” Rhett asks.

With a nod, Benny says, “She’s all alone. What if she thinks it’ll stay that way? That she’ll never see us again?”

“If we go back, then this is over,” Andrew tells him. “You’ll go back to living with her.”

For a second, Benny hesitates, but then he nods. “I don’t want her to be alone. But . . .” He backs away and looks up at Rhett. “We’ll still see you?”

“Absolutely,” Rhett says. “You’ll have to pretend you’ve never met me, though.”

“We can do that.” Andrew nudges Benny. “As long as you’re sure?”

“I am. She’s nicer by herself, and I don’t want her to keep missing us.”

“We can make it happen,” Oliver says. “I’m sure she’ll be relieved to see that you’re both okay.”

“When can we go home?” Benny asks.

“Just give us a week,” Rhett replies. “We already have a plan in place to get you back home.”

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Chapter Thirty-Six

Rhett

Before we get the boys back to Corinne, I do my best to spend as much time with them as possible. It'll be a while before I can show up and explain to Corinne who I am. If it's too close to Richard's death and the boys' return, it could look suspicious.

I'll miss them both—even Andrew. He's come around to truly seeming remorseful about what he did, and I hope that continues. He has a lot of growing up to do, but thankfully, he has plenty of time to do it.

The day we say goodbye to the boys, we tie them up and leave them in an abandoned warehouse. All it takes is an anonymous tip to the authorities, and then the police come and get them out. We coached Andrew and Benny on what to say—and what *not* to say—for hours. They won't let us down.

When we get home, the mansion feels empty. The boys were only here for two weeks, but now it feels like they're just as much a part of this place as we are.

Night falls on us quicker than I expect, and I'm left feeling restless. There's only one thing left to take care of now. One more thing, and then

the future we've been dreaming of will be here.

Sammy's murder will be avenged.

Everyone will be together.

We'll be free.

It's been long enough, a voice whispers in my head, not for the first time. But now, I think I finally agree with it. I've held us back for long enough. Holloway has been in an unimaginable amount of pain. He's paid for what he's done.

"It's time," I say.

Wren closes her book and looks up at me. She's curled up on the couch with Oliver, reading while he strokes her hair. I've been standing by the window, watching raindrops trail down the window.

"You're sure?" Elliot asks from where he's lounging in an armchair. "You can't take this back."

When I nod, they all stand. Wren moves toward me and places her hands on my chest before pressing a tender kiss to my lips. As I brush my knuckles down her cheek, I inhale her sweet floral scent. Without her and Finn, I'm not sure where we'd be.

"I love you," I whisper, brushing her hair out of her face.

Her smile is warm and bright. "I love you, too."

Hand in hand, we head down to the basement. If it wasn't for Wren touching me, I'm not sure I'd be able to process that this is real. That we're finally *here.*

Oliver unlocks the door and pulls it open. Inside, Ludo looks like he's barely moved since the last time I was down here.

"Don't you think you've done enough?" Ludo asks, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“Not quite.” Pulling a knife from my pocket, I flip it open, and Ludo’s eyes widen with fear.

“No more,” he croaks. “Please.”

I crouch down in front of him, smiling at the pure terror in his eyes. “If any of you have one last thing you want to say, this is it.”

Both Elliot and Oliver shake their heads. They’ve said and done everything they’ve wanted to.

“Sweetheart?” I turn to look at her.

Wren’s jaw is set as she glares down at Ludo. She moves closer, very intentionally knocking one of her feet into his leg. When Holloway cries out, her eyes flash with pure hatred.

“You called me a coward once,” she says. “You remember that?”

He looks at her and just barely manages a nod.

“But it was always you. You hid behind power and wealth, behind your bodyguards and your deals. You killed a fucking child because you were afraid of her.” Wren shakes her head. “I’m no coward. But you are.”

When her gaze meets mine, her expression softens, and she nods. I could draw this out, but to be honest, I don’t want to. So I place the blade against Ludo’s throat and cut deeply across it, watching as blood pours out. He grabs onto my arm, trying to stop me, but he’s too weak.

We watch in silence as he struggles and chokes, his chest painted in blood. My heart clenches as I think of Sammy, of how I wish this could be a trade-off—his life for hers. This is the best I can manage, though. I found her killer, and now I’ll do my best to live a happy life in her honor.

As Ludo finally stills, Oliver releases a sharp breath and grabs Elliot’s arm. Despite the tears welling in his eyes, he smiles. “It’s over,” he whispers. “It’s finally over.”

Standing, I pull Wren away from Ludo's body and move us closer to Elliot and Oliver. She throws her arms around both of them, and Elliot grabs me and yanks me into their hug. I somehow end up nestled between the three of them with Oliver kissing me fiercely.

"We did it," he says, pulling away to look me in the eyes before kissing me again. He's gripping my face, and his body is shaking. "*We did it.*"

Oliver kisses Elliot the same way before grabbing Wren, dipping her backward, and pressing his lips to hers. She cries out in surprise, but it quickly turns into a delighted laugh as he straightens and keeps kissing her.

My heart warms at the sight. We've been fighting for revenge, but we've been fighting for this, too. I'll never stop mourning my little sister, but my body feels lighter. Already, smiling comes easier, and the guilt doesn't swirl through my mind as I do.

"Now it's time to really celebrate," Oliver says. He's already unlocking the door and pushing it open.

With one last glance at Ludo, I follow the others out of the cell. We'll deal with his body later. Right now, he's the last thing on my mind.

"My room," I call as Oliver drags Wren up the stairs.

Since I was pretty sure we'd be killing Ludo today, I prepared a bit. This isn't something that we can celebrate the normal way. It calls for more.

"You have something planned?" Elliot asks.

"I do. You'll see."

Upstairs, Oliver throws Wren onto my bed. They both tear each other's clothes off while Elliot and I wash our hands in the bathroom. As Ell takes his turn, he notices one of my knives sitting on the counter. I cleaned it earlier in hopes of this.

"That for me?" he asks.

“If you’d like it to be.”

With an eager smile, Elliot nods. I pin him against the counter and fit my mouth to his, too impatient to wait until we get back to the bedroom. Moaning, he grabs onto me, pulling my hips into his.

“I don’t want to fight today,” Elliot tells me between kisses. “Just make me yours.”

I bite his bottom lip gently before pulling away. That’s *exactly* what I plan on doing.

In my bedroom, Oliver and Wren are already undressed, and they make quick work of me and Ell. Oliver sees my knife and must get an idea of what I have planned because he waits for further instruction after that.

I shove Elliot forward. “You, get on your back in the middle of the bed.” Once he does, I straddle him, running my hands over his bare chest. My fingers trail down his side to where the butterfly tattoo sits on his ribcage. “Oliver, Wren, come here.”

Both of them climb onto the bed. Oliver is on my left, and Wren is on my right. They’re both watching me eagerly.

“Kiss him,” I say, flipping open my knife. “Distract him from the pain.”

Oliver goes first, dipping his head down and sealing his lips to Ell’s. For a few brief seconds, I take in the sight. There hasn’t been an instance where watching them together *hasn’t* turned me on.

Placing one hand on Elliot’s shoulder to hold him down, I slowly lower my knife. “Stay still.”

Carefully, I slide the edge of the blade over the skin just below Elliot’s collarbone. I start with an “R,” smiling as blood wells from the cut. Elliot hisses from the pain when Oliver pulls away.

“Your turn, sweetheart.”

She caresses his face before leaning down and kissing him. I do a “W” next, and Oliver smiles when he sees. Just like I did with Wren, I keep the cuts as shallow as possible. Scarring isn’t Elliot’s thing, and it doesn’t take much to get enough blood.

Once I’ve finished, I quickly move onto the “O.”

“Rhett,” Elliot groans tightly once I’m halfway through.

“You can take it, pretty boy.” I do the last section before pulling away and admiring the way it looks. “All done.”

Wren pulls back, and she smiles when she sees. “You did all of us.”

“Fitting, don’t you think?” I run a finger through Elliot’s blood and use it to draw a small heart on Oliver’s chest. When Wren did it to me all those weeks ago, I thought it was sweet. Oliver seems to agree because when he sees it, his face lights up.

“Perfect,” he whispers.

I do the same thing to Wren and Ell, and just as I’m about to do it to myself, Elliot grabs my wrist. With his free hand, he dips his finger in the blood and paints the heart onto my chest himself.

“God, I love you,” I mutter before leaning down and slamming my lips to his. When he opens his mouth, I thrust my tongue inside, and he sucks on it before I pull away.

For a second, I let myself stare at the three of them. In all our time together, I don’t know if I’ve ever felt closer to them.

We did it. We actually did it.

Elliot wraps his hand around my cock and strokes, so I do the same thing to him. His skin is soft, and his dick is already hard.

“You like it when I make you bleed, Ell?” I ask him. “You like it when I mark you as ours?”

With a groan, Elliot nods. “You know I do.”

Oliver grabs the lube for us and squirts some onto my hand when I hold it out. Just as he’s about to do the same thing for Elliot, I knock his hand away and begin stroking both our dicks together.

“Wren, sit on his face,” I say.

“Fuck yes,” Elliot moans. As Wren crawls on top of him, he caresses her thighs. “Fucking suffocate me.”

“Ohhh,” she gasps when he pulls her down. She reaches out and grabs onto Oliver’s shoulder as her eyes widen. “Oh god, Ell.”

With my free hand, I grip her chin and angle it upward so she’s looking at me. “Open your mouth, sweetheart.”

She does, and I spit onto her tongue. Satisfaction swirls through me as I watch her swallow. She cranes her neck upward, her eyes begging for a kiss, and I happily give it to her. When we pull away, Oliver is there, and his lips brush against mine.

“Let me?” he asks, and I feel his fingers feathering over the back of my hand.

Nodding, I let go of mine and Ell’s cocks. My hand is quickly replaced by both of Oliver’s as he kisses me fully.

“That’s it, love,” Elliot says. “Ride my face.”

Oliver and I break off our kiss so we can watch Wren roll her hips. Her breathing is heavy, and I watch as her blood-stained chest heaves with her every movement.

“Ell,” she whimpers.

“Don’t stop,” I command. “You don’t stop until you’re screaming and coming all over his face, you hear me?”

She nods, reaching out for me and grabbing onto one of my shoulders. I lean down and capture her mouth in a hard, demanding kiss. Her moans have me so turned on, and I thrust into Oliver's hands, feeling myself rubbing against Elliot's dick.

This. Nothing could ever replace having all of us together. I love the feel of their bodies against mine—love the sights and sounds of their pleasure.

I wrap my clean hand around Wren's throat and squeeze the sides lightly. She gasps as I pull away so I can watch her.

"Is this okay?"

She nods, her fingers digging into my shoulder. "More."

I tighten my grip the slightest bit more, making sure to keep the pressure off her windpipe. Her eyes roll into the back of her head as she rocks against Elliot's face. He's groaning into her, and it sounds like he's enjoying eating her out as much as I'm enjoying watching him do it.

After a few more seconds, I loosen my hold on Wren's neck. She gives me a hazy smile at the rush of blood to her head. At the same time, Oliver picks up the pace of his strokes.

Pressure is just beginning to build in my body, and I lean to the side to kiss Oliver. I'm proud of him for going into the basement again, and I want him to know it, so I kiss him like I'll never be able to get enough of him.

"Ell," Wren moans. Her hand has slid down my arm, and she's gripping my wrist while I continue holding her throat. "Ell, I'm gonna come."

Oliver and I pull away from each other so we can watch. Wren cries out as her orgasm washes over her. It's a beautiful sight, and we both stare at her as Elliot works her through wave after wave.

"Too much," she gasps, finally lifting herself off Elliot's face. "It's too—"

"More," Elliot says, grabbing her hips and forcing her back down.

“Ell!” Wren throws her head back as he sucks on her clit. She tries to squirm away, but he won’t let her. “Oh, fuck.”

“You can take it, princess.” Oliver leans forward and takes one of her nipples into his mouth.

“God—oh my god, O.” She grabs onto his hair to pull him up until she fuses her mouth to his.

Oliver’s hands slow from distraction, so I grab onto them to tighten their hold and thrust upward. Elliot groans at the added friction, and the sound pushes me closer to the edge.

Wren’s eyes are unfocused and half-lidded from the pleasure Elliot is coaxing out of her. She looks close to another orgasm, like the slightest touch could set her off, probably because Elliot never fully gave her a chance to come down.

“Come with me, sweetheart,” I say, leaning down and kissing her lightly. I trail my hand from her throat to her breast and roll her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. “My beautiful whore.”

“Rhett,” she whimpers.

“I know.” I kiss her again, running my tongue along her bottom lip.

And then she explodes. I swallow her cries, eating them up as my own orgasm slams into me. The release of pressure causes my mind to go blank as my cum shoots out onto our hands and Elliot’s stomach.

When I come back to reality, Wren is writhing and clinging to me as Elliot continues working her with his tongue. She’s caught between the sensations being too overwhelming but not wanting to stop.

“Fuck—Ell, I—I *can’t,*” she finally cries.

He lets her up, and she releases a long breath. I smirk. Wren’s eyes are wide, and she’s panting.

“My turn,” Oliver says.

Wren climbs off Elliot and collapses onto the mattress. I join her, leaning against the headboard and pulling her into me.

Oliver’s gaze is heated as he straddles Elliot. He squirts more lube onto their cocks before wrapping his hands around them and moving up and down. He continues just like that until Elliot comes with a shout. From there, Oliver keeps stroking his own cock until he follows.

The whole time, I hold Wren close to me and keep my eyes locked on Oliver and Elliot. Once they’ve both finished, Elliot grabs Oliver and yanks him down into a long, hard kiss.

With a smile, I let my eyes slide shut. *We finally made it to the end.* Except this isn’t the end—not really. For us, it’s the beginning.

Killing Ludo won’t heal us completely. Neither will just being together. But the weight on my shoulders is already lighter. I still feel Sammy with me, but now the burden of guilt has disappeared.

I can breathe again. I can *live* again.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Wren

Two weeks after Ludo's death

The last song of the concert comes to an end, and applause fills the theater as one of Oliver's favorite pianists gets up from the bench and takes a deep bow. She's glowing, and as she straightens, I grin at the smile on her face.

Oliver leaps to his feet along with the rest of the audience, and I follow suit. He looks good—healthy and happy—and it makes my heart melt to see him this enthusiastic.

It's amazing how much difference a short amount of time can make. All of us are doing much better.

As we file out of the theater, Maria loops her arm through Oliver's. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"That was *amazing.* She's even better in person than I thought she'd be. I'm glad we got the chance to see her. Thanks for coming out with us."

"Oh, Ollie. You're always worth celebrating." She plants a happy kiss on his cheek.

Right. I almost forgot that she thinks this is all because of Oliver's birthday next week. It sort of is, but it's mostly an extended celebration of Ludo's death. We have other things planned for O's birthday.

We all head to a nearby rooftop restaurant that Elliot loves and get drinks. Meredith has been enjoying a lively conversation with Finn, which is a relief to us all. I was worried she wouldn't be able to get over her initial dislike of him, but they're getting along just fine.

The guys are laughing happily with Sparrow and Maria, and I watch them all with a soft smile. Behind them, the sun is mostly set, but the string lights overhead illuminate the rooftop just fine.

We're just missing Aubrey, I realize. When I told her about our plans, she said she wished she could come out for a week, but she can't risk showing her face here. Ludo is officially missing, but the authorities and the general public don't know he's dead yet.

With the information that Axel has leaked, there are now a lot of people who want to hurt Holloway. Many of them would be happy to do that by killing his wife. It's all right, though. We're planning on doing a yearly trip so we can see each other in person.

Maria slips away from the rest of the group to join me. Together, we lean against the railing and take in the view.

"We still good for our shopping trip tomorrow?" she asks me. "I have our whole day planned, and Elliot already gave me the go-ahead."

"I'm looking forward to it."

We got to meet last week when we went over to Meredith's for dinner. Just like Oliver said, his mom is an incredible cook. I didn't want to stop eating.

A slight breeze passes over us, and I shiver. Without the sun, it's a little chilly. I'm in love with what I'm wearing—a black dress that hugs me in all the right places—but it probably wasn't the smartest thing to put on.

"Cold?" Rhett asks as he moves toward us. He already has his suit jacket halfway off.

"A little." But at the realization that he's been watching me, warmth floods my body. When he drapes his jacket over my shoulders, I stretch upward and plant a kiss on his lips. "Thank you."

He adjusts the jacket to make sure it's secure before he rejoins the group, his hand sliding into Elliot's. Over the past two weeks, I've seen him loosen up more than I ever thought possible. Now, he looks completely at ease.

"Did something happen?" Maria asks me. "I mean, I know his dad passed away. But is that really what's made the difference? I've never seen him be this lovey-dovey before."

I choke on my drink. *"Lovey-dovey?"*

She giggles. "I think it's cute."

With a laugh, I let my gaze rest on Rhett. He's still fairly reserved, but he's definitely been more affectionate lately. Me, Ell, and O have all been soaking it up. "I think Richard's death probably had something to do with it. He's healing. We all are."

Maria will probably never know the full extent of what we're healing from, but that's okay. It doesn't change the amount of love she has in her heart for us.

We should probably join everyone else, but Maria and I wander into the little garden section of the rooftop. It's a peaceful area with a cute archway and a fountain in the center. The small pool is lit up, and the water glitters from the lights.

I don’t know if I’ll ever fully get over my fear of water. At this point, it’s more of a simmering anxiety instead of the full-blown panic it was a month or two ago. Standing right next to the fountain, I’m more conscious of my balance, and my mind desperately wants to put more space between the water and me. But I don’t *need* to.

I’m okay, I realize with a smile.

Maria nudges me, leaning in to whisper, “Elliot is staring at you.”

Looking up, I meet his gaze. Even at this distance, I can see the slightest hint of concern on Elliot’s face as he takes a slow sip of his drink. His eyes never leave me, but he doesn’t come closer.

Always watching.

The guys know my strength, and while their first instinct is to shield me from anything that might hurt me, they’ve come to respect it. But that doesn’t mean they won’t always be there to catch me if I fall.

“He does that sometimes,” I say softly.

“I think it’s sweet. I remember being a kid and noticing when he’d just randomly watch Ollie or Rhett. Oh, who am I kidding? They all did it to each other.” She rolls her eyes. “Although back then, they were all lovesick for each other and just wouldn’t admit to it. Bunch of idiots if you ask me.”

At that, I laugh. I remember Elliot telling me that they didn’t start dating until senior year of high school, but hearing Maria’s perspective is *much* more entertaining.

Maria smiles as we both watch Oliver slip his arms around Elliot from behind. He’s grinning, and based on the way he’s leaning into Elliot just a little too much, I’d say he’s well past tipsy.

“You girls all right?” Meredith asks, and I realize she managed to sneak up behind us.

“Yeah,” Maria replies, “we just wanted to check out the garden. You ready to head home?”

“Only if you are.” Meredith smiles. “I’m too old for late nights.”

“Ugh, Mom, you’re not even that old.” Maria shoves her in the shoulder lightly. “But yeah, we can go. I have to get a good night’s sleep so I can drag Wren around all day tomorrow.”

They both say their goodbyes. Once they’re gone, Oliver sweeps me into his arms, almost causing us to tumble to the floor.

Rhett grabs us both before we lose our balance, and he frowns at Oliver. “After this, I’m cutting you off.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Oliver taunts playfully.

His eyes darkening, Rhett wraps an arm around Oliver’s torso and yanks him closer. I don’t hear whatever Rhett murmurs into Oliver’s ear, but I think I get the idea.

Oliver’s eyes are sparkling as he pulls away. “I dare you to do it right here.”

“O,” Rhett says, his voice low and threatening.

“Do it, you won’t.”

Finn shakes his head. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’ve missed your stupid antics, Oliver.”

“Don’t worry,” he says with a grin. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ve had enough kidnapping to last a lifetime, thank you very much.”

“If Finn has to help bail you out for a *third* time, you all owe him a vacation,” Sparrow says. “A *long* vacation.”

“I feel like we might already,” Elliot says on a chuckle. “Thank you both for all your help in taking down Ludo. If there’s any way we can repay you, just let us know.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Sparrow says with a smile, her eyes sparkling. “The future holds *plenty* of possibilities. I’ll be cashing in a favor when the time is right.”

“To the future,” Oliver cheers, his voice a little louder than it needs to be. He raises his drink, and we all do the same.

“To the future,” Sparrow says, clinking her glass with Finn’s. “It’ll be much more peaceful and prosperous than the past.”

“Why are you being so goddamn cryptic?” Finn narrows his eyes at her. “You’ve got something planned, don’t you?”

She takes a sip of her drink to hide her smirk, not bothering to respond.

“You and your secrets,” Finn grumbles.

We all laugh, and I lean into the guys, appreciating the warmth that comes with their closeness. Even if Oliver is a little too drunk, I’m in agreement with him. Our future is bright, and hopefully, it’ll be as prosperous as Sparrow says.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Rhett

One month after Ludo's death

I slide my hands into my pockets after ringing the doorbell to Corinne's home. As I wait for an answer, I stare up at the house that my father built. Did he ever feel any guilt about leaving me and Sammy behind? Did he ever blame himself for her death, or did he see it as a way out of a family he was trapped with?

It's probably for the best that I'll never know. I'm pretty sure the answer would only cause me more grief.

When the door opens, I plaster on a pleasant smile. I try not to think of Corinne as the woman my father cheated on my mother with. I think of her as my brothers' mother—the woman who's going to be in my life from this day forward no matter what.

The look of immediate recognition on Corinne's face doesn't surprise me. I've always hated how much I look like my father.

"Can I help you?" she asks suspiciously.

For the briefest of moments, I stall. I thought about dozens of ways this conversation could end, but never how it would start. I suppose there's no other way to go about this than to just dive right in.

I clear my throat. "Yes. My name is Rhett Brooks. I'm not sure if Richard ever told you about me, but I'm his son from his first marriage." It's the truth—I really don't know if Richard kept us from her.

"I think he . . . mentioned you once or twice."

"I saw his obituary in the paper. I'm so sorry for your loss." I infuse my voice with as much sympathy as I can.

"Thank you." She gives me a cautious smile.

"Do you think I could come in for a few minutes?"

Her eyes widen, and I can practically see her raising the walls she barely lowered for me.

"I saw in the obituary that I have two brothers, and I—"

"No, I don't think that'd be a good idea." She starts closing the door.

I grab it, holding it open. "Please, just a few minutes. I lost the only sibling I thought I had."

I timed this almost perfectly. Once Benny got back into his normal routine, I kept an eye on his comings and goings as much as I could. Andrew left to pick him up from school a while ago, and they'll be back any second now.

My suspicions seem to be correct. I'm sure Corinne knows more about me than she's letting on, and I doubt she has any intention of welcoming me into her boys' lives. But, quite frankly, I don't give a shit.

"Please," I say again. "I think we both know you at least owe me that."

Her expression softens—not with compassion, but with guilt. Finally, she opens the door up enough that I can slip through.

The interior of the house looks much different in the daylight. It's much warmer, although I don't know if I could ever be comfortable in here.

"I saw in the paper that their names are Andrew and Benny," I say. "Are they here? How old are they?"

"They'll be home soon," Corinne says, wringing her hands. "Drew is nineteen. Benny is twelve."

My jaw drops, and I widen my eyes. "Nine—*nineteen?* He's that old?"

Corinne nods, avoiding my gaze.

"But that would mean . . ." I pause, partially for dramatic effect and partially so it looks like I'm doing the mental math for the first time. "I'm sorry, I must be confused. When did you and my father get together?"

Nervously, Corinne tucks some of her hair behind her ear. "Don't you think it's more important to focus on the present? Andrew and Benny will be here soon, and then you can meet them. That's what you want, right?"

I sigh. On my way here, I was hoping she'd own up to her past mistakes. But no, she's trying to bury them, and she has the audacity to think I'll go along with it.

"Did you know she had cancer?" I ask.

Corinne frowns. "Who?"

"The woman Richard was married to while he was fucking you behind her back," I say flatly. "My mother. She was dying, and Richard was supposed to be there for her, but he abandoned her when she needed him the most. I won't ask again. Did. you. know?"

She swallows, and her lack of an answer is all I need.

She's just as much of a monster as he is.

"Do you at least feel guilty?"

“I—” Her voice falters, so she tries again. “Your father was lonely. You and your mother were a huge weight on his shoulders. And then Sammy came along, and Richard only felt more trapped.”

“So you think he was justified in abandoning us.”

“What? I—*no*, I just—” She throws her hands up. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? My husband just *died*, and now you’re in here accusing me of what? Being the reason he cheated? That’s not my fault!”

“No, but you could’ve done what any decent person would’ve done,” I growl. “You could’ve told him to go back home to his family.”

“He was unhappy! Your mother—”

“Do you even know her name?” I spit out.

“Of course I do.” But her voice gets higher pitched, and she shifts her eyes away from me.

“Then say it.”

She opens her mouth, but then she closes it. Desperation fills her features, and finally, her shoulders sag. “I forgot.”

My jaw clenches. Maybe it’s better this way. I don’t want to hear this woman speak my mother’s name, anyway.

“Look, I—”

“I hope you hate yourself.” My voice is so calm, so nonchalant, that I have to hide my surprise. I feel oddly detached, like I’m watching this conversation instead of participating in it. Maybe it’s because I know that no matter what, I have to accept that this woman is part of my life now.

Her head jerks back like I just slapped her. “That’s it. I’ve had enough. Get—”

“Do you know how Sammy died?” I ask, not caring what she wants. Not one bit.

“Wrong place, wrong time.” She shifts nervously. “She was shot.”

“And why was she in that *wrong place* at the *wrong time?”*

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Guess.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t.”

“Can’t?” I ask. “Or do you just not want to admit that he was with you when he should’ve been picking up his daughter from school?”

She swallows, staring at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t deserve the life you have,” I grit out, “and you definitely don’t deserve your children.”

For the first time, fear ignites in her eyes. She doesn’t know who I am—what I’ve done—but she’s getting a glimpse of it now.

“I can’t take you away from Benny,” I say. “I’m sure he loves you, and I won’t be the reason he loses his mother. But the moment I hear that you’re treating him poorly, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you never see him again. You understand?”

The anger that fizzled out due to her fear comes back full force. “How *dare* you threaten to take my son away from me. He’s mine! You didn’t even know he existed a month ago. You’re a *monster.”*

“And you loved the man who created me. What does that say about you?”

She’s about to answer, but then we hear a shout from the driveway. When I look out the window, I see Benny running up the path. He must’ve seen my truck out front. He knows better than to let on that he knows who I am, but of course he’s excited.

I turn to Corinne, knowing we only have a few seconds alone. “I’m in their life from this point on, whether you like it or not. My advice to you?

Don’t fuck this up. Because if you do, you’ll regret ever getting involved with Richard in the first place.”

Just as the front door swings open, Corinne nods quickly. I can see it in her eyes. Now that Benny and Andrew are about to meet me, she’s lost control. They’ll never forgive her if she tries to push me out. Benny will continue living with her—as long as she treats him well—but she knows she can’t fight.

I’ve already won.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Elliot

Three months after Ludo's death

A warm summer breeze rustles my clothes as I pop a piece of fruit into my mouth. This is the first picnic I've been on since I was a kid, and I'm kind of wondering why we haven't done one before Wren.

"It's nice here," Oliver says from where he's lying on his back with his head in Rhett's lap. "Peaceful, you know?"

I nod in agreement. "What do you think, love?"

Wren sits a mere foot away from me. She's wearing a lilac dress I picked out for her the first weekend we were together. As soon as the weather got warm enough, she started wearing sundresses almost constantly. I think it made Oliver just as happy as it seems to be making her.

Taking a deep breath, she looks around. "I think it's beautiful here."

I smile. We promised to take her wherever she wants, and so far, we've followed through. This trip to England is just one of many.

Following Wren's gaze, I watch the waves from the sea lap up onto the shore. The water is a pretty blue-gray color thanks to the mostly overcast

sky. It’s the perfect day for a picnic.

Eventually, I choose to focus on Wren instead of the view. Her hair is up, so her butterfly tattoo is visible. It makes me smile every time I see it.

At some point, I stopped remembering the woman I killed every time I looked at Wren. The fear and love in her eyes right before I shot her will never fade from my memory, but it’s not as present as it used to be.

When I looked into her background, I discovered she did some work with a charity that supports single mothers. I waited until things settled down, and then I set up a monthly donation to the charity in her honor. It’s not officially in her name—that would raise questions—but I know who it’s for, and that’s what matters.

Over the past few months, we’ve let ourselves live. There hasn’t been anything looming over our heads—no jobs, no guilt, no plans. Just us.

I didn’t realize just how much our choices had affected us until after the fact. We’ve had to relearn how to exist. Our priorities have changed, and we’ve been spending more time with Oliver’s family and Rhett’s brothers. It’s been . . . different. Slower, but not in a bad way.

I cover Wren’s hand with my own. Even with all the pain and stress, I wouldn’t change our past. In the end, it was worth it. We avenged Sammy, and we ended up closer than ever.

Sitting up, Oliver picks up a strawberry and holds it to my lips. “You look way too serious right now, Ell.”

Opening my mouth, I take the strawberry and suck the excess juices off his fingertips. Heat ignites in his eyes, quickly followed by annoyance. We’re not alone out here, so he’ll have to wait until we get back to the hotel.

“Tease,” he grumbles.

I smirk at him.

“What were you thinking of?” Rhett asks.

“How far we’ve come.” I rub my thumb over the back of Wren’s hand when she looks my way. “How happy I am.”

Rhett smiles. It’s something that he’s started doing much more of lately. “I’m happy, too.”

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Chapter Forty

Oliver

One year after Ludo's death

"That was amazing," I say, grinning at the older woman sitting at the piano in front of me.

"I practiced a lot," Helen replies. "Think she'll like it?"

"I think she'll *love* it."

When I opened my studio, my intention was to teach kids music regardless of what their parents could afford to pay. I wasn't prepared for the adults who requested lessons, too, but I wasn't about to turn them away because of their age. It brings me joy to watch them learn to play piano when a lot of them have wanted to for so long.

Happy tears well up in Helen's eyes. "I've wanted to play this for her for years."

Helen and her wife recently got a piano from a school that was off-loading a bunch, but neither of them knew how to play. But for the past few months, Helen has been working hard to learn Eloise's favorite song for her birthday.

“You’ve been able to keep it a surprise?” I ask.

“Only been practicing while she’s at work,” Helen replies. “I figure she’ll probably start pestering me about getting lessons soon. I mean, what’s the point of having a piano in your house if you’re not going to play it? I don’t think she suspects at all.”

I grin. “Good. I’m glad.”

We finish up, and she gives me an excited hug before heading out. I’m in the middle of tidying up the room when Rhett comes in. This is usually the time he stops by, so I’m not surprised. I don’t have any more lessons until after school lets out, and he’s made it his personal mission to make sure I remember to eat lunch every day.

Rhett kisses me on the cheek before pulling me into my office. “How are lessons going today?”

“Pretty good. Helen is improving fast.”

He smiles. “I wish I could be there to see Eloise’s face when she plays that song.”

“She promised to record it to show us.”

“Thank fuck. It’s going to be so sweet.”

We sit down, and Rhett hands me a sandwich before pulling out his own. This has become somewhat of a routine for us, and it’s my favorite part of the day. After this, he’ll probably stop by to check on Elliot and Wren, and then he’ll go pick Benny up from school.

Corinne has adjusted to having Rhett in their lives. Hell, I think she’s actually started liking him. We had her and Benny over for dinner last week, and she was much less tense than she normally is.

As for Andrew, he moved out of state for college. He and Rhett talk once a week or so, and he seems like he’s doing better. We were all hoping that

college would help him grow up, and so far, it seems to be working.

"You look nice," Rhett tells me as he slides a container of cut-up cantaloupe onto the table. "Is that a new shade of eyeliner?"

"It is," I say, a smile blooming on my face. Couldn't wipe it off even if I wanted to.

Now that we've had the time, I've found myself regularly dressing the way I want to. I was a little nervous with how my students would take it, but turns out, they love it. A couple of them have started experimenting and trying out similar makeup styles, and I love watching their eyes light up whenever I compliment them.

"I'm proud of you, you know," Rhett says softly.

"I know. I'm proud of you, too."

The past year has been so different than the rest of our lives. We've all started going back to therapy, and Rhett has started to process a lot of the trauma that he's had bottled up his whole life. He still has a long way to go, but watching him unlearn the lies Richard told him has been healing all on its own.

"I feel like we're living in a dream," he mutters, shaking his head. "Even now, it still doesn't feel real."

"I know what you mean. We got lucky."

He leans back in his chair, his eyes sparkling. "Or maybe it was fate."

I smile. "Or maybe it was fate."

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Chapter Forty-One

Wren

One year after Ludo's death

I hum to myself as I carry the box of new books through the store. Usually I come in with Ell, but I was so excited when I got the notification that this shipment came in. I couldn't wait, and he'll be in soon, anyway.

Besides, I like being at the shop by myself in the mornings. It gives me some time to soak it all in before we have to rush to make sure everything is ready for the day.

I have to rearrange the shelves to make room for the books. They should go in the poetry section, but I want Isabella Dupont's new collection to be front and center on release day.

It's been a few months since Aubrey Stallard passed away in a car crash. Isabella, however, is alive and well and living her own version of happily ever after in California. We get to talk every once in a while, and we have a trip planned to visit her coming up next week.

Once I have her books up front, I take the books I had to displace to the back shelf. There's some room all the way up at the top, and I can put these

there for now.

Typically, Elliot stocks the top shelves because they're the tiniest bit too high up for me, but I've managed before. I just have to make sure to keep my balance.

Once I'm on the ladder, I stretch upward, trying to reach the top shelf. I positioned the ladder wrong, so I have to lean backward a bit, but I'm able to slide the books almost exactly where I want them.

Just . . . have to be . . . careful.

With one last stretch, I push the books into place on the shelf—and tip backward in the process. I try to grab onto the ladder, but it's already out of reach as I fall. I let out a terrified yelp as I brace for impact.

Except instead of hitting the hardwood floor, I land directly into a pair of arms that grip me tightly. I grab onto Elliot as my panic quickly fades into relief.

"Oh," I breathe out. "Thank you."

Frowning down at me, Elliot says, "I thought I told you I'd handle the top shelves."

"Yeah, but those new books came in, so I had to rearrange." Pecking him on the cheek, I place a hand on his chest. "I guess I got a little excited."

"I can tell. You were out the door so fast this morning, I didn't even have a chance to tell you I was ready to leave early." Carefully, Elliot sets me down. "You could've gotten hurt, love."

"But you made sure I didn't." Smiling, I tug him down and kiss him.

With a soft moan, Elliot cups my face in his hands. His lips move against mine gently as I rise onto my tiptoes and slip my arms around his neck. He tastes like cinnamon and sugar.

I pull away. "Did you steal one of the muffins from the shop?"

With a bashful smile, he says, “Maybe.”

“Ell! Those are for the customers.”

He shrugs. “There are plenty left. Besides, that’s not what’s important right now. You’ve gotta be more careful on the ladder. If I hadn’t been here, you could’ve hit your head or broken something.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “I should’ve moved the ladder to a better position.”

Elliot runs a hand over my hair. “Please don’t do it again.”

“I won’t,” I tell him as I smile reassuringly. “I promise.”

That seems to placate him enough—especially since I mean it—so we move on to getting the store ready to open for the day. Ava texted me that she’s running late, so I start opening up the coffee shop and bakery side of things. Almost as soon as we opened, we had to hire a manager, and Ava was the first person who came to my mind.

Once Elliot finishes opening up the bookstore side, he steps into the coffee shop side. “Need help, love?”

“Don’t think so. I’m basically done, and Ava should be here any minute.”

“Mmm.” He moves behind the counter, and just as I’m turning away from the sink, he pins me against it. His breath feathers over the skin of my neck before he kisses it. “You need help with . . . other things?”

I roll my eyes. “*Ell.* I told you, Ava will be here any minute.”

He groans. “Goddammit.”

“Once we’re home, we can do whatever you want.” I slip my arms around his neck and press my lips to his.

He raises an eyebrow. “You sure you want to sign yourself up for that?”

“Most definitely,” I say with a grin. More than anything, I know I can trust him. He’d never do something I wasn’t okay with.

Leaning in, Elliot places his lips right next to my ear. “Then I’m going to tie you up, blindfold you, and watch while Rhett and Oliver use you however they want. And then, once they’ve had their fill . . .” He pulls back, and the heat in his eyes makes my stomach flip. “You’re all mine.”

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Chapter Forty-Two

Rhett

One year and six months after Ludo's death

We stand in front of the newest addition to a local conservatory. For the most part, we've been uninvolved in the process of building it—aside from funding it, that is.

The staff member who led us back here unlocks the door before turning to us and smiling. "It's open now. If you need anything, just check with the front desk."

"Thanks," Elliot tells her as she walks off, but I barely hear.

In loving memory of Samantha Brooks. That's what's engraved on the metal plaque hanging above the doors. Even though there's no logic to the thought, I wish she could be here to see this.

When I realize Elliot is staring up at the plaque as well, I know I'm not alone in my line of thinking. This place will always be bittersweet for us.

Oliver runs a comforting hand down my spine. It gives me the strength to move forward and place my hand on the doorknob. Turning, I look back at

the three people who'll never give up on me. The three people who've proven their dedication and their love for me over and over again.

"Ready?" I ask.

Ell smiles. "Whenever you are."

I push the doors open, and we step in quickly before I close them behind us.

The butterfly garden is beautiful—a small section of paradise in the middle of the city. The room is filled to the brim with lush greenery, flowers, and more butterflies than I can count. The grand opening is tomorrow, but the conservatory is letting us in early.

Stopping by the entrance, I take a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scents of the flowers. I've gotten better at pausing to take in the little moments.

Not everything is perfect, but our days are brighter. I've never felt so at peace before in my life. And now, watching Wren, Ell, and Oliver meander through the butterfly garden, my heart swells. A butterfly lands on Oliver's nose, and he freezes, a giant grin spreading across his face. It flits away after a few seconds.

"Oddly itchy," he says, rubbing at his nose.

Wren giggles, sliding her hand into mine and tugging me closer. "What do you think?"

"It's perfect." Dipping my head down, I kiss her temple, breathing her in. "She would've loved it."

Turning around to face me, Wren places both her hands on my chest. Her eyes hold a hint of sadness for Sammy, but her smile still lights up the room. "I'm glad, Rhett."

Elliot slips his arm around my torso, and Oliver does the same thing on my other side. Surrounded by them, everything feels . . . stable. I know I

have them for the rest of my life, no matter what.

Over the past year and a half, their support of me has been unmatched, as has mine of them. We've built a balanced life together—one that honors our past without holding us back from our dreams.

That's part of the reason why we decided to have the butterfly garden built in Sam's memory. It feels like it's the last thing we need to fully get closure. We'll never forget her, but in a way, this is us finally laying her to rest.

"How do you feel?" Oliver asks me.

"Good," I say softly, pulling all of them closer.

My body doesn't tense at their touch anymore. Thoughts of Richard are more distant, and when they do press in, I've found new ways to combat them. The darkness he tried so hard to immerse me in has passed.

No, I realize as I kiss each of them tenderly. *It hasn't just passed.*

It's been replaced with more love and care than I ever thought I deserved, and I'm never letting anyone take it from me again.

THE END.

Stay tuned for Axel's book, Finn's book, and a Ruthless Desires prequel.

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Deleted Scene

If you want to read one of the deleted scenes from Vicious Deception, **click here** and sign up to my email list.

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Author's Note

Thanks so much for reading Vicious Deception and for sticking with the Ruthless Desires Series until the very end!

A special thank you to my sensitivity and beta readers—Ruthie, Yolanda, and Maycie. Your suggestions helped this book to be way more well-rounded. And, of course, thanks to my love. Without you, I'm not sure where the plot would've ended up.

If you'd like to stay up to date with my latest writings and adventures, you can check out my website elirafirethorn.com or follow me on **Instagram, TikTok,** and **Pinterest.** If you'd like to join my Facebook group, **tap here** or search "Elira Firethorn Reader Group" on Facebook.

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